

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE



BUISÉID DRÉACHT 2020

DRAFT BUDGET 2020

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL

2020 BUDGET

To An Cathaoirleach and Each Member of Laois County Council

Dear Councillor,

The attached Budget for the financial year 2020 has been prepared in accordance with statutory format for consideration by the Elected Members. The Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government by Circular Fin 07/2019, dated 29/08/2019 determined the period November 1st to November 30th as the prescribed period for County Councils to hold their 2020 Statutory Budget Meetings.

Laois County Council's statutory budget meeting is scheduled to take place on Monday, 11th November, 2019 at 11.00am. The process of considering and adopting the Budget must be concluded before November 24th 2019.

The process of compiling the budget involves a number of stages including:

- Consultation with the Corporate Policy Group to consider budget strategy, local property tax rate and high level budget considerations.
- The consideration by the elected members of the impact of a variation of the Local Property Tax rate.
- Detailed review of all aspects of the Budget with Directors of Services, Head of Finance and all budget holders.
- The consideration and adoption of General Municipal Allocations by the three Municipal District memberships at their recent Municipal District meetings.

The final stage of the budget process is the consideration by the Elected Members at the Annual Budget meeting on Monday 11th November 2019.

Laois County Council is required by law to adopt a budget that is sufficient to meet the proposed expenditure for the year ahead. Total expenditure must be matched by total estimated income from commercial rates, local property tax, government grants and charges for goods and services. Furthermore, Section 16 of the Local Government Act 2001 requires the Council in discharging its functions to have regard to the resources available to it, the need to maintain essential services and to ensure that a reasonable balance is achieved across its functional priorities and service areas.

In addition to adopting the budget, the Elected Members must also determine the annual rate on valuation to be levied on commercial properties. Members are aware that an owner assisted revaluation process was completed by the Valuation Office in County Laois in 2018.

RESERVED FUNCTIONS OF ELECTED MEMBERS

The members have a number of reserved functions in relation to the budgetary process as follows:

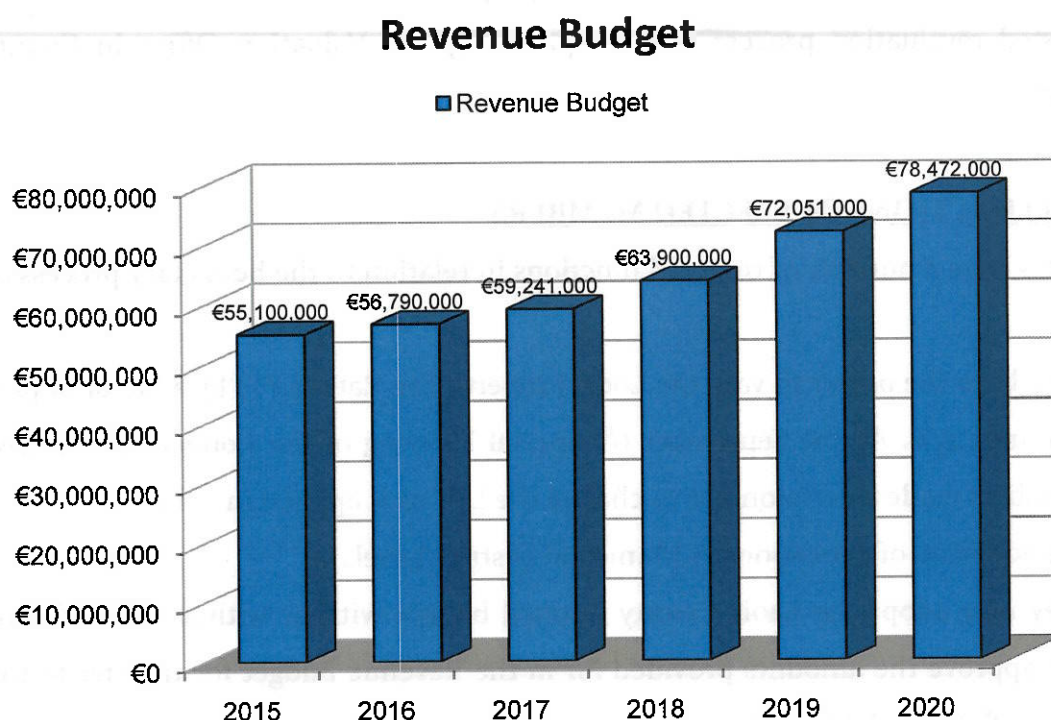
- (i) They have the power to vary the Local Property Tax Rate (LPT) by a factor of plus or minus 15%. At the September 6th Special Meeting of the Council the Elected Members made a decision not to change the LPT as it applied in 2019.
- (ii) The adoption of allocations at Municipal District Level.
- (iii) They may adopt the Laois County Council budget with or without amendment and approve the amounts provided for in the Revenue Budget for transfer to the Council's Capital Account.
- (iv) The determination of the Annual Rate on Variation (ARV) must be decided by the Elected Members at the Annual Budget Meeting.

- (v) In accordance with the provisions of Section 31 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014, the Members have the power to set the proportions of rates refunds applicable on vacant commercial premises.

BUDGET CONTEXT 2020

Over the past last five years there has been a steady increase in revenue expenditure and investment into services provided by the local authority in County Laois. This trend is continued in 2020 and the revenue Budget for members' consideration now stands at €78.472 million, an increase of €23.37 million since 2015.

Revenue Budget 2015-2020



Laois County Council continues to exercise prudent budgetary oversight and sound financial management over all aspects of its spending. The anticipated deficit going into 2020 will stand at approximately €50,000.

The main factors that shape the drafting of the 2020 budget are:

On the income side:

1. Buoyancy in income from commercial rates, including rates from Irish Water, yielding an additional estimated income of €651,000.
2. Retaining an increased income from the Local Property Tax, as in 2019, in the amount of €495,256.
3. An increase of €550,000 from rents on Council owned houses.
4. Increased allocations to Laois County Council under the non-national roads programme.

On the expenditure side

1. The ongoing requirement to address housing maintenance matters and to meet statutory accommodation standards for rental accommodation.
2. A requirement to provide matched funding to support a number of projects and initiatives including,
 - a. the Town and Village Renewal Scheme (2019/2020),
 - b. The Rural Regeneration Development Fund applications
 - c. The Urban Regeneration Fund projects (Low Carbon Town and The Cultural Quarter) for Portlaoise
 - d. the application for EI Regional Enterprise Development Fund assistance, and,
 - e. the Failte Ireland Tourism Destination Towns scheme

3. The requirement to meet targets and develop actions to comply with Public Sector Energy efficiency requirements, Climate Action and Decarbonisation measures following the publication of the Climate Action Plan 2019 over the summer.
4. The requirement to ensure resilience and licence updates in the Council's IT System.
5. The requirement to provide improved personal protective equipment to the Fire and Emergency Services teams.

LOCAL AUTHORITY BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS FOR 2020

The Annual Budget for 2020 provides for a significant and continued level of investment in the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of County Laois. It sets out to deliver on a number of core objectives as follows:

1. To continue our investment in Housing and Community Services.
2. To develop and implement the economic and community plan for Laois that supports job creation, tourism and sustainable communities.
3. To maintain our level of investment in providing quality public services.
4. To protect the environment, to meet the challenges posed by climate change and to ensure public safety.
5. To deliver improvements for quality of life in the County's main towns and villages.

The gross revenue expenditure required to run public services in Laois on a day to day basis is €78.472 million representing an increase of 8.9% in comparison with 2019.

The following areas of increased expenditure are of particular note:

- An increased provision of **€503,000** for maintenance and repairs to Council housing (meeting the obligations of the 2017 and 2019 Standard for Rented Housing Regulations).
- An additional sum of **€317,500** to assist in homeless services and the provision of emergency accommodation.

- An increased provision of **€201,000** to update the Council's IT network and to acquire and upgrade operating system licence agreements
- Funding of an additional **€146,000** for essential personal protective equipment and apparel for fire and emergency response crews,
- Provision of an additional **€105,000** for street cleaning and disposal of cleanings to authorized facility.
- Additional funding of **€114, 000** towards local climate action measures (Portlaoise Low Carbon Town, Lighting Replacement, Cycle and Town Bus Network planning)
- An increase of **€104,000** for local roads maintenance.
- Increased support for tourism in the County in the amount of **€62,000**.
- Provision of an additional **€60,000** in respect of the maintenance/ replacement requirements in the County's playgrounds and the provision of universal access equipment in three playgrounds
- An additional **€36,000** towards river drainage maintenance programme on the Barrow and Nore bringing the total Drainage budget for 2020 to **€409,000**
- A new provision of **€40,000** in respect of support for the implementation of the Community CCTV scheme in Co Laois
- An increase in the library book fund of **€25,000**.
- Provision of an additional **€22,000** in respect of cemeteries
- Provision of an additional sum of **€20,000** for the maintenance of parks and open spaces.
- Continued support for small businesses through the rates incentive scheme, paint the shops scheme and vacant property incentives.

THE FUNDING OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN LAOIS

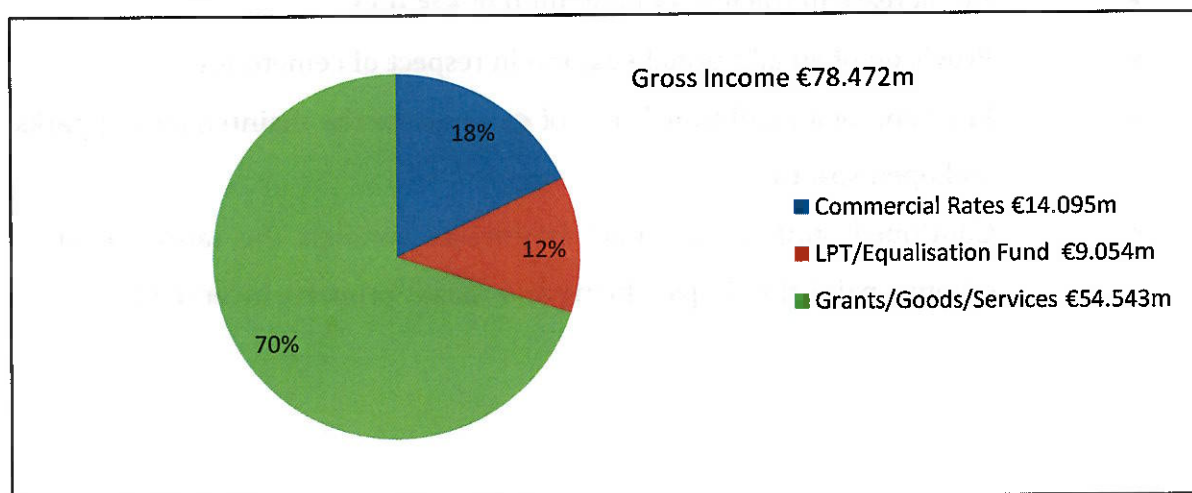
The combination of the retained Local Property Tax and the distribution of the Equalization fund amount to €9,054,133 for Laois County Council in 2020.

Members at municipal level have decided the detail of General Municipal Allocation apportionment in the 2020 municipal works schedule and a sum of €437,000 has been included between the three districts. In addition a sum of €75,000 has been included for specific municipal works (€25k per district), of value no less than €5k each, to be decided by each municipal district. Members also have a role in the discretionary maintenance of non national roads and the amount under this latter heading will be made known by the Department of Transport and Transport Infrastructure Ireland early next year.

Commercial rates remain our most important source of locally generated income and are budgeted at €14,095,376 for 2020. The increase in rates income, at €651,833 for 2020, is due mainly to a rates liability to Irish Water and the occupation and valuation of new properties in the past 12 months. It is critical to the budget arithmetic for the year ahead and will be of significant support in the provision of essential public services.

Sources of Funding for 2020

The following chart shows the principal sources of funding in the 2020 Budget.



COMMERCIAL RATES AND SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESS

There is no change to the commercial rate for 2020. In an effort to continue this Council's support to small business and in order to incentivise the revitalisation of town centres I am recommending the following to the Elected Members:

- The continuation of the rates payment incentive scheme introduced in 2016 and further agreed in 2018 so that all rate payers liable for an annual rate payment of €10,000 or less will receive a benefit of a 4% rebate in 2020 where rate bills are paid promptly and in full. Small business accounts for around 80% of rate payers and together employ around 5,000 people throughout the county,
- The retention of the incentive scheme, in designated areas, for business start ups in vacant properties where vacant units lie idle for six months or more and whereby the owner can avail of a rate rebate of 75% down to 25% over three years.
- The retention of the "Shop Front" scheme whereby property owners can avail of a €750 grant.

The retention of the 4% incentive scheme for those ratepayers paying less than €10,000 can be seen as easing the burden on approximately 1,720 smaller businesses and rate payers in the county and is in line with this Council's policy to support small business through difficult trading years and to mitigate against the ever increasing impact of on line purchasing and competition from nearby urban centres.

I am not proposing any increase in parking charges in the Portlaoise, Portarlington or Mountmellick urban areas.

THE WIDER LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONTEXT

The gradual realignment of responsibilities and reporting arrangements relating to certain local government functions from the Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government is now increasingly evident. The current reporting relationships with State Departments are summarised as follows;

1. Department of Housing Planning and Local Government; Matters relating to social housing, rents, housing grants, County and Local Area Plans, Planning Policy, Urban Regeneration, Local Government Fund, Emergency Planning , Rural Water and Register of Electors and Workforce Planning
2. Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport: Matters relating to Rural Roads and public transport, Non National Roads Funding, Sports and recreation grants.
3. Department of Communications Climate Action and Environment. All matters involving reporting on broadband, waste management, energy efficiency, waste and litter grants and the performance of tasks set out under the National Climate Action Plan of 2019.
4. Department of Rural and Community Development. Matters relating to Towns and Village renewal, Clár, Library Development and funding, Rural Regeneration
5. Department of Justice and Equality: Matters relating to the Coroners Service and Community CCTV and integration,
6. Department of Finance, Public Expenditure and OPW: Matters relating to flood relief and flood defence capital projects, historical buildings, pay , pensions and superannuation.
7. Department of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht; Matters relating to Biodiversity, Creative Ireland, Natural and built landscape, structures at risk funding.
8. Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation: Matters relating to the LEO and enterprise support
9. Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; Matters relating to animal welfare and veterinary inspections
10. Department of Defence relating to Civil Defence

Laois County Council has taken these changes in hand seamlessly and the Council has adapted well to the current multi reporting and accounting structure. It must also be borne in mind that in addition to Government Departments, the Council operates service level agreements with:

- Irish Water
- The Food Safety Authority of Ireland
- Music Generation Ireland
- The Local Authority Sector in relation to MY PAY
- Enterprise Ireland, in relation to the Local Enterprise Office
- The Sports Council

and works in very close collaboration with Transport Infrastructural Ireland (National Primary & Secondary Roads, Motorways) the Office of Public Works, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Sustainable Energy Agency Ireland and the Heritage Council of Ireland. The Council also acts as a Financial Partner to Laois Partnership in relation to the LEADER and SICAP programmes.

The evolving changes in government programmes and shift in national priorities as well as the further development of the Council's role in leading local economic and social development have been thoroughly considered and are provided for in so far as practicable in the Council's Annual Service Delivery Plans and in turn in the 2020 Budget.

THE GENERAL ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

The year to date has seen continued growth in both the local and national economies. Year on year Ireland has added 54,000 new jobs in 2019. However the impact of Brexit is such that only 19,000 new jobs are expected to be added in 2020. The national unemployment rate is now 4.8% while the rate for the Midlands remains higher than the national average at 6.6% and 3,843 people remain on the live register in Co Laois.

The largely favourable national outcomes to date have been driven by forecasted national GDP growth of 5.5% for this year^(Dept of Fin) allied to continued growth in consumer spending (2.7%) in 2019 and positive figures for exports (10.2%).

The trend is difficult to predict for 2020 and there are signs that the pace of recent expansion in the national economy has slowed.

In the circumstances of a disorderly Brexit, GDP is expected to shrink to -0.7% next year while growth of 3.1% in GDP is forecast in the event of an orderly Brexit. National unemployment is expected to rise to 5.7% in 2020 in the event of a disorderly Brexit and this will give rise to adverse effects in the performance of the Laois economy.

There are well documented challenges facing the local and national economy. In less than three months time Ireland's most important trading partner will leave the European Union. There are also rising trade tensions on a global scale. These combined threats in addition to currency exchange rate movements have the potential to adversely impact some of our key economic clusters in County Laois, namely, the agri-food sector, manufacturing, technology and services.

It is apparent therefore that ongoing policy vigilance and agility is required in the current environment. It is also to be noted that our Local Enterprise Office and Business Support Unit have been to the fore in providing training and awareness to the business community in preparing for Brexit in particular and in equipping business to embrace on line opportunities.

Despite these challenges the overall outlook for Laois remains mostly positive and announcements during the past two years regarding new investments in jobs and enterprise in our county very much underpin this favourable outlook.

THE STIMULUS EFFECT OF LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL'S BUDGET 2020

The Revenue and Capital Budget programmes provide services and investment that aim to improve the county as a place in which to live work and invest. In 2020 the Council is projected to spend €78.47 million in Revenue expenditure and €34million in Capital expenditure. Revenue expenditure funds the day to day operations of the Council and assists numerous communities, associated companies and voluntary organisations by way of direct financial support. Capital expenditure funds many once off Capital projects such as libraries, new roads and new social housing schemes.

The economic impact of the Council's budget is a function of the level and types of spend by the Local Authority. The expenditure over the year accrues some benefit to those business and suppliers/contractors that provide goods and services to the Council as well as the economy indirectly through increased consumption and employment in secondary business. At a basic level there are direct, indirect and induced impacts and conservatively the multiplier effect is estimated at 1.6 so that the total local impact is in the order of €180 million.

While such expenditure related impacts are very important to the local economy in Laois, the real economic and social impacts of the Council's Budget go away beyond this. Selected examples of the downstream knock-on impacts are:

- The National Enterprise Park at J17, Togher: Research shows that the provision of Industrial and Enterprise Parks can provide a major boost to local levels of economic and employment activity and provide an open door to investors and employers who take confidence from local authority or State backed assets. It is very encouraging to note the level of interest in the J17 location since the Council's decision to purchase the site in 2017. The ongoing construction work by Glanbia Cheese (investing €130 million in Portlaoise thereby creating 78 jobs) is very welcome. In addition Laois Co Council has awarded a contract for the construction of a new access road and services in the value of €3million and work has already started on this project. In the nearby IDA Park on the Mountrath Road Canadian

Company Greenfield Global are well advanced in constructing their new ethanol manufacturing plant which on completion will yield 30 new and another 30 jobs are to be provided by SkOUT at the same location.

- Tourism and Hospitality Promotion: Significant work is being undertaken by Laois Co Co in partnership with the Laois Tourism Board, Laois Leader Partnership, OPW, Coillte and Failte Ireland in attracting tourists and visitors to the County through the provision of amenities, festival support, walks cycling trails and developing the Ancient East product. The combined impact of the Electric Picnic, the Scarecrow Festival and the Fort Protector Festival, for example, is estimated to draw around 100,000 visitors to the County yielding an economic contribution of €6 million locally. Furthermore it is estimated that up to 500,000 people visit the county's renowned attractions (Emo Demesne, Dunamaise and Donaghmore) and festivals on an annual basis. Around 1,100 jobs are sustained in the County through tourism, hospitality and recreation.
- Promoting and Supporting Indigenous Employment: The Laois Local Enterprise Office in partnership with the Council's Business Support Unit supports the development of SMEs in the County. A full programme of advice, training, mentoring, education in addition to financial supports and making available on line trading vouchers helps to stimulate and grow local business and sustain an entrepreneurial spirit in the county. In 2019 to date the LEO has provided €242,541 in grant aid to support 47 new jobs and provided training to over 560 business people. The number of jobs supported by LEO is now over 635.
- Measures to enhance the Quality of Life: LCC devotes a considerable resource to matters relating to quality of life in the community. In partnership with Laois Leader, the LCDC, Tidy Towns Groups, Voluntary Organisations and the associated companies of the Council, the Local Authority is to the forefront in promoting local and community development, in promoting the arts , heritage, music, culture and sports and in supporting social enterprise, social and community integration.

THE MAIN DELIVERY PRIORITIES FOR LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL...BUDGET 2020 AND BEYOND

Having regard to the views of the Elected Members, central government policy direction and statutory obligations the headings below indicate the focus of the Council's delivery efforts in the period ahead. To this end the Members will note that during the course of the year I made changes to the Directorates of the Council in order to respond more fully to the ongoing demands on Local Government in Laois.

HOUSING SUPPLY AND ACCOMMODATION

The provision of new social housing and accommodation remains a top priority for Laois County Council for 2020 and thereafter.

While the capital investment in the provision of social housing is contained in the Council's Capital Programme, the revenue budget plays a significant part in the delivery and support of social housing under the five pillars of "Rebuilding Ireland" 2018 to 2021.

The Council's housing programme is on course to deliver over 1,000 homes in the period 2018 to 2021. This is well in excess of the target of 627 homes set by the Dept of Housing, Planning and Local Government over the same period. The resources available to the Council's housing department have been increased significantly in the past 2 years and the task in hand is to deliver much needed housing through a blend of direct build, leasing, turnkey, Housing Assistance Payment, RAS, Part V and direct acquisitions. The Council continues to make steady progress under this programme and is on course to provide homes to 135 families in the current year, thereby exceeding the target of 86 units set by DHPLG for 2019. We are now nearing mid point in the Rebuilding Ireland programme 2018 to 2021. It may be beneficial in the context of the consideration of the 2020 Revenue Budget to gauge delivery for each of the past 5 years and to note proposals for delivery of housing and accommodation to the end of 2021. The table below refers.

Year	No of homes provided
2015	43
2016	140
2017	164
2018	194
2019	185
Subtotal for last 5 years	726
<i>2020 planned</i>	<i>314</i>
<i>2021 planned</i>	<i>400</i>
Over period 2015 to 2021	1440

(Homes have been delivered through a mix of direct build by LA, voids, relets, turnkey, AHB and acquisitions.)

Members should also note that the Council has used its powers under Compulsory Purchase on 19 occasions to secure abandoned or derelict homes.

In addition the Council will have assisted over 1,000 applicants, cumulatively, to source and secure accommodation through HAP by the end of the year. Accordingly, the Local Authority is on course to provide solutions to the housing needs of over 1,700 families in the five year period to the end of 2019 and to 814 families in 2019 alone.

The housing authority will continue to operate at a high level of activity in the next twelve months to achieve further progress over the following selected areas:

- Purchase of sites and lands in high demand locations through the use of Compulsory Purchase if and where appropriate.
- Provision of more homes to accommodate smaller family units and single person applicants reflecting the fact that 78% of those on our housing list, totalling 780, are in this category.
- Acquisition by agreement or through Compulsory purchase of derelict residential

- units suitable for the delivery of social housing through the Vacant Homes Office
- Work closely with Approved Housing bodies in the delivery of more homes with particular emphasis on the former Convent site Portlaoise, CBS Lands, O' Moore Place and Knockmay / Hepburn Court.
 - Prepare a number of scheme layout plans/master plans for consideration by the members in advance of the statutory public consultation process.

In the area of preventing homelessness, the Council continues to prioritise this matter and expenditure of €642,500 is provided for this purpose in 2020. A HAP Place Finder commenced employment in late November 2018 and this position will shortly be dedicated to the role in Co Laois. An additional social worker will also be appointed in the coming weeks.

The Rental Accommodation Scheme, the HAP Scheme and Long Term Leases remain important sources of housing provision with expenditure recoupable from the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government.

The 2020 Revenue Budget provides additional financial resources for the maintenance and improvement of its approx 2,255 housing units by way of the revenue budget and a sum of €3,314,500 is provided in this regard for 2020.

CLIMATE ACTION, ENVIRONMENT AND FLOOD RELIEF

The Climate Action Plan 2019, published earlier this year, sets out a clear ambition to deliver a step change in this country's emissions performance over the coming decade so that we can meet our EU targets for 2030 and also be well placed to meet our mid century decarbonisation objectives. The plan sets out a number of actions to be taken on by the Local Authority sector including leadership in climate action but also uniquely identifies the development of *"Portlaoise as a low carbon town using a suite of initiatives and a range of technologies deployed to serve as a demonstrator for other towns"*.

To date Laois County Council has:

- set up a climate adaptation team
- prepared and approved a Climate Adaptation Plan
- appointed an Energy Performance Officer
- established a low carbon implementation team for Portlaoise
- taken the lead role as Midland Energy Agency, and
- prepared local biodiversity plans.

The Council has also performed strongly in the area of public sector energy efficiency achieving a 41% reduction in energy use in 2019 in comparison to 2009 and ahead of the sectoral target of 33% set for 2020.

The establishment of four Climate Action Regional offices during the course of 2018 marked the beginning of a new approach to the preparation of Climate Adaptation and Mitigation planning by Local Authorities in the State.

In this regard it follows that Laois County Council must play its part in achieving statutory targets set under various international agreements, national law and the Climate Action Plan.

A programme of work to be undertaken in the short term and for which a budget of €115,000 is provided includes;

- ❖ The replacement of the existing stock of street lights with efficient LED lighting
- ❖ The roll out of additional e-charging points in Portlaoise in collaboration with SEAI
- ❖ The ongoing planning and implementation of flood relief works in Mountmellick, Portarlinton and Clonaslee
- ❖ The planning of a town bus service for Portlaoise using energy efficient transport and the planning of a cycle path network for Portlaoise

- ❖ The roll out of further better energy community projects in collaboration with SEAI

- ❖ The planting of additional tree stock in the county's towns and villages.

2018 witnessed the establishment of River Basin District Management offices throughout the country with additional scientific staff assigned towards meeting the requirements of the Water Framework Directive and achieving good ecological status in our rivers and water bodies. The Local Authority Water Consultation Offices together with Teagasc, Department of Agriculture and major dairies will continue to target high priority water bodies in the current year. In addition the Environment Department of LCC will continue to provide advice as to the necessary programme of measures necessary for good nutrient management and environmental protection.

Members should note the inclusion of €3,000 in the Budget in respect of the Cathaoirleach's Award for good environmental practice in the farming community.

ECONOMIC AND ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT IN LAOIS

Laois County Council carries out important economic development functions in its own right and on behalf of Enterprise Ireland under a service level agreement. The Council will continue to collaborate with IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland in Laois so that the County can realise its full employment and investment potential.

The Council's Business Support Unit and the Local Enterprise Office work hand in hand from their shared base at County Hall in promoting business activity in the County. The BSU and LEO will continue to provide support for micro enterprise, SME's and economic and tourism development generally as well as exploring and pursuing opportunities for foreign direct investment into the County. The operational cost of the LEO continues as a contra item in the 2020 budget and a sum of €1,190,000 is allocated to support enterprise, training and business innovation in Co Laois

The purchase of the J17 Enterprise Park in 2017 provides a clear opportunity for Laois to set its own strategic direction for employment types and land uses at one of the prime locations on the M7 inter urban motorway. Construction work on the development of the Glanbia EU Cheeses Plant continues apace and the Council has just commenced work on a new access road and services for the site. It is currently predicted that the new manufacturing plant will be operational in early summer 2020 and that the new road and cycling infrastructure will also be in place at that time. It is expected that during the course of next year there will be further development activity on the site bringing more investment and employment to the area.

When positioned against new development on the IDA site on the Mountrath Road (Greenfield Global) , new digital hubs in Mountmellick (the Webmill), Mountrath (Bloom HQ), Clonminan (Vision 85) and Portarlinton and Portlaoise Enterprise Centres it can be seen that steady progress is being made in the county in attracting talent and economic activity. The marketing and promotion of Laois in collaboration with the newly established Laois Chamber of Commerce, the IDA, EI and the business community will continue to be one of the Council's main goals in 2020.

The Local Community Development Committee (an independent committee of the Council) was established in mid 2014 and from 2016 was also designated as the Local Action Group (LAG). It has now embarked on a new term bringing with it responsibility for delivery the LEADER programme in Co Laois in partnership with Laois Partnership Company and Laois County Council as financial partner.

The committee is statutorily responsible for the planning and co-ordination of local and community development programmes, in accordance with the 5 year Local Economic and Community Plan that was adopted by Laois County Council in early 2016. The LCDC also works in an oversight and partnership role with the Laois Partnership Company in

delivering the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) in the County.

Laois County Council therefore occupies a significant and pivotal role in economic development locally and must structure itself to respond to new demands on Local Government, must work in partnership with IDA and Enterprise Ireland and must identify opportunities as they arise to stimulate economic development and create the environment for job creation.

THE REGENERATION OF OUR TOWNS AND VILLAGES

The great work of all communities in Co Laois and the commitment to high standards by the Laois Tidy Towns Federation is extremely encouraging and all those voluntary groups as well as the staff of this Council must be lauded for their outstanding efforts. There were a number of notable achievements throughout the county in 2019 not least the attainment of gold and silver medal status by Abbeyleix and Portlaoise and an Endeavour Award by Ballinakill in the 2019 National Tidy Towns competition. There were also sterling efforts by the community in Mountrath in the IPB/Co-operation Ireland Pride of Place competition.

Over the past two years Laois County Council, with significant support from the Department of Rural and Community Development, has invested heavily in rural regeneration through such programmes as the Town and Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS), CLÁR, Tidy Towns Grants, Community Enhancement Scheme, Tourism Grants, Better Energy Communities, Sports and Recreational Grants, Cemetery Grants etc to the order of €4.0 million.

During the course of 2019 the Government formally approved this Council's application for funding support under the Urban Regeneration Development Fund for "The Low Carbon Town" and "The Cultural Quarter" in aggregate value of €12.07 million up to 2022.

The Fund was launched in 2018 on foot of Project Ireland 2040 and sets out to deliver a pilot Demonstration project for urban regeneration in Portlaoise thereby aligning with components of the “Vision Statement for Portlaoise” prepared by the Council in 2017 in collaboration with the Portlaoise Town Team.

At the same time the NPF commits to a renewed focus on activating the potential for the renewal of smaller towns and villages. Taking advantage of these opportunities and the funding streams announced subsequently, I can confirm that Laois Co Council has applied for financial assistance under the Rural Regeneration Development Fund and the Regional Enterprise Development Fund (Strand 3).

While the Council awaits the outcome of the applications it is considered prudent to provide a matching sum of €1.81 million in the Capital Budget for 2020 to 2022.

Having regard to the making of the Portlaoise Local Area Plan and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy and in order to position Portlaoise as a true economic driver in the region it will be necessary to:

- (i) plan for a more cohesive and connected urban centre having regard to the needs of business, heritage and to cater for pedestrian comfort, safety and accessibility ,
- (ii) pursue solutions for urban renewal and urban dereliction through adaptive use of building to accord with the principle of living cities initiatives
- (iii) pursue the provision of much needed additional parking in the vicinity of Portlaoise Railway station to cater for existing and future rail travel between Portlaoise and Dublin.
- (iv) advance measures to ensure the Town can increase business and economic growth while reducing carbon emissions and achieving better energy efficiency in the urban environment

TOURISM , HERITAGE , TIDY TOWNS

The Tourism Development Plan for Laois was launched in early 2018. One of its main objectives is to develop the visitor attractions of Emo House and Gardens, the Rock of Dunamase and the Portlaoise Fort Protector under the Ireland Ancient East branding. While Laois Tourism currently retains the services of an animator the Council will continue to provide significant tourism services and support in collaboration with Laois Tourism and Failte Ireland. The 2020 budget provides a sum of €238,000 to assist and support the further development of the tourism product and to improve tourist information facilities and online information for visitors to the County.

Construction work on the first phase of the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail (35km) has been substantial completed by Coillte with a view towards having it available to visitors by the end of the year. The completion of the balance of the project (50km) is to be funded from an already approved grant from DRCD to Coillte under the rural regeneration programme announced earlier this year. Matched funding of €380,000 is provided in the capital budget for 2020 to 2022.

The Council will continue to support festivals and community events and will work closely with the Laois Leader Partnership to assist community groups to promote festivals and events of a larger scale to attract bigger national attendances.

The protection of the natural and built heritage is an important function of Laois County Council, a countywide asset that is valuable in its own right but also to the tourism and visitor experience in the County. To this end and in acknowledging the value of built heritage to the tourism industry and local communities a sum of €23,000 is provided in respect of Borris in Ossory Courthouse, the Fintan Lalor Homestead.

A sum of €764,000 has been provided in the budget for street cleaning, parks, landscaping and maintenance of open spaces. This is a critically important function for the local

Authority particularly as we try to attract more visitors and economic activity to all parts of the county.

In addition the community grant aid scheme, so important to local community groups, tidy towns grants and community projects is to be increased from €138,500 to €168,000 in 2020.

CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2020 TO 2022

The elected members are obliged to consider an indicative three year capital programme at the statutory Budget meeting of the Council. The revenue budget 2020 makes provision for repayment of portion of capital deficit balance incurred on a number of capital projects over the past number of years. The total value of capital works included in the revised programme amounts to an estimated €140.7 million but the delivery of such works is entirely contingent on funding becoming available to the Council through state grants, development levy income and contributions from other sources.

Development Contributions

At this point in 2019 just over €700,000 in development charges has been collected. The scheme was revised and approved by the Members in late 2017 and further extended in October this year so that added stimulus could be provided to the private housing construction sector. The workings of the new scheme will be monitored on a continuous basis.

LOCAL AUTHORITY GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Audit Regime

It is fundamental to the management and operation of Laois County Council that a sufficient level of control and oversight is in place at all times. Good governance is a key

factor in attracting new business to Laois as well as engendering trust and transparency for the people of Laois.

The Laois Internal Audit Committee has recently been renewed following the local elections of 2019. I wish to thank the members of the former Committee and the new membership including Councillors Aisling Moran and Padraig Fleming for their work in this important area of local government scrutiny.

The Local Government Reform Act 2014 provided for the establishment of the National Oversight and Audit Commission to examine local government performance. The Council is also scrutinized by the Local Government Audit Service, by Transport Infrastructure Ireland, by the Department of Transport, by the Environmental Protection Agency, by the Department of Housing Planning, Community and Local Government and by the Health and Safety Authority. This level of oversight is essential in the delivery of a wide array of services provided by Laois County Council.

Members should note that Laois Co Council continues to report to the EU on a quarterly basis in relation to financial performance.

Strategic Policy Committees

The Council's four Strategic Policy committees, Committee 1, Economic Development, Enterprise and Planning Committee, 2. Housing Committee, 3. Community Social, Cultural and Heritage Committee, 4. Transportation, Environment & Emergency Services have addressed major strategic issues facing the County under the Chairmanship of Councillors Seamus McDonald, Jimmy Kelly, Mary Sweeney & Paddy Bracken.

The newly convened SPCs under the Chairs of Councillors Thomasina Connell, John King, Paddy Bracken and Conor Bergin in respect of 1. Enterprise, Economic Development and Tourism, 2, Housing, Regeneration & Planning, 3, Climate Action and Community, 4. Transport, Environment and Emergency Services are also embarking on a new programme of work and policy development for this Council.

The SPCs are an important part of the Council's policy development process and they dealt with a very significant range of policy matters during 2019.

Municipal District Committees

The Council's three district committees of Borris in Ossory/Mountmellick, Portlaoise and Graiguecullen/Portarlinton under the current Chairmanships of Councillors John King, John Joe Fennelly and Paschal McEvoy (and up to May 2019, Cllrs Paddy Bracken, Catherine Fitzgerald and former Cllr John Moran), respectively, met to deal with issues relating to service delivery on an area basis and to agree programmes of works to be included in the new municipal works schedules. The municipal committees have addressed a range of road, traffic management, village renewal, community, environmental improvement and service issues for their localities in 2019.

Conclusion

I wish to thank all the members of the Council, Cathaoirleach Councillor William Aird and his predecessor Councillor John King for their continuing work in advancing the development and interests of the County.

The members through their actions have ensured that significant positive development will take place in the county and that every community in Laois will further benefit in the period ahead.

I wish to include in my thanks the SPC chairs, and the chairs of the Municipal Districts.

I wish to acknowledge the members of staff who retired in 2019 and to thank them for their outstanding public service to the people of Laois. I also wish to remember all those associated with the Council who have sadly passed away in the last year.

I wish to record my particular appreciation to Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance, Donal Brennan, Michael Rainey, Simon Walton, Director of Services for their work in preparing the 2020 Budget and for their unstinting commitment and hard work over the past year. I wish to acknowledge the ongoing work and management of the MYPAY shared service centre under John Forde, Director of Services. I also wish to acknowledge the work of all the staff of Laois County Council over the past twelve months.

I recommend to the Council the formal adoption of the Budget and the General Annual Rate on Valuation of .2217 in respect of the financial year 2020.

Mise le meas,

John Mulholland
Chief Executive

6th November 2020

SERVICE DIVISION - HOUSING & PLANNING

Housing

For the second year in a row the Council will exceed its annual Rebuilding Ireland target by over 50% (Figure 1). With the inclusion of existing units that have been relet, the Council will have provided directly or indirectly through Approved Housing Bodies a total of 375 permanent tenancies in 2018 and 2019. In addition the Council will have assisted over 1000 applicants to source and secure accommodation through HAP by the end of the year (Figure 2).

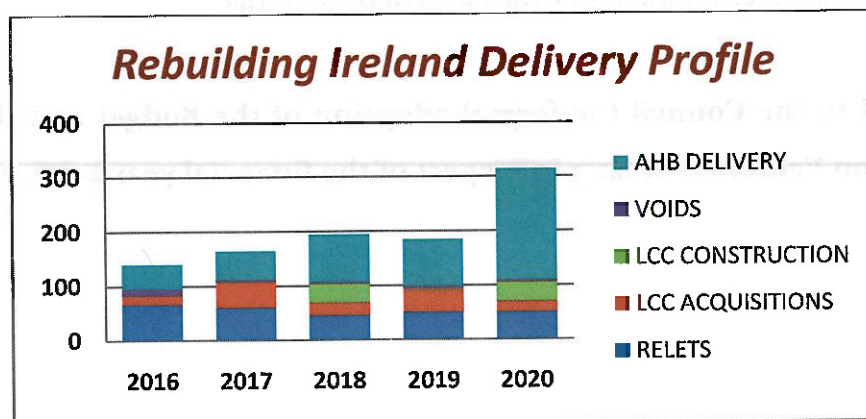


Figure 1: Rebuilding Ireland Delivery Profile, including 2019 and 2020 projections.

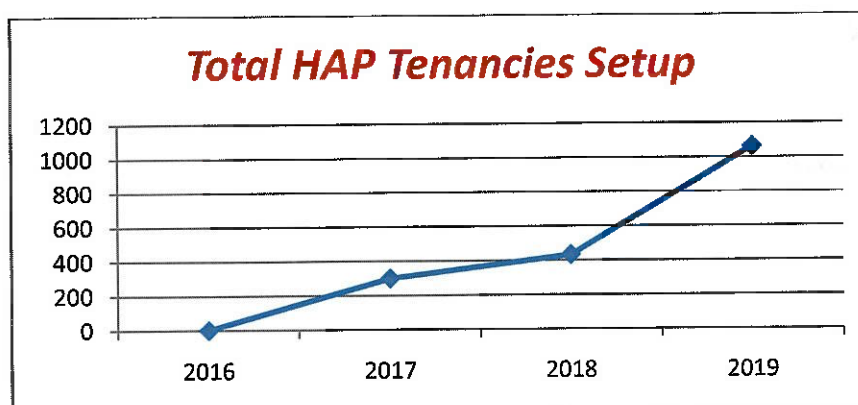


Figure 2: Housing Assistance Payment Tenancies Setup in Co. Laois

More significant still is the number of social and voluntary housing projects that have commenced construction across the County in 2019, ensuring that 2020 will deliver the largest number of units to date under Rebuilding Ireland. Table 1 below gives a summary of the social and voluntary housing projects that are currently at construction stage.

Scheme	Units	Progress
Ballymorris, Portarlinton	22	Direct Build. Contractor on site
54 A&B, Hillview, Portlaoise	2	Direct Build. Contractor on site
Harpurs Lane, Portlaoise	1	Direct Build. Contractor on site
The Orchard, Stradbally	6	Direct Build. Contractor on site
Main Street, Stradbally	16	North & East Housing Association. Contractor on site
Borris Road, Portlaoise	36	Tuath Housing Association Contractor on site
Bellingham, Portlaoise	30	Cluid Contractor on site
Ballickmoyler Road, Graiguecullen	20	Co-operative Housing Ireland Contractor on site
Kilminchy, Portlaoise	10	Oaklee Housing Association Contractor on site
Doirin Alainn, Ballylinan	12	North & East Contractor on site
Wilton Lawns, Portarlinton	2	Respond! Housing Association Contractor on site

Table 1: Social & Voluntary Housing Sites currently under construction in Co. Laois

In addition to the above, a large number of projects have made good progress through the DHPLG four stage process and many have secured Part VIII approval in 2019. Many of these projects will reach construction stage before the end of 2019 and into early 2020.

Urban Regeneration remains a core objective of the Housing capital programme. To date the Vacant Homes office have commenced 19 Compulsory purchase Orders on vacant and derelict residential units. Demolition works have been completed on the Hepburn Court site and CLUID Housing Association will shortly tender for the development of voluntary housing on the site. A CAS application has been submitted by CLUID Housing Association for the development of 11 units on the site of the Old County Hotel. CLUID Housing Association is at advanced design stage for the delivery of voluntary housing and a 100 space car park on the vacant CBS lands. Finally, a detailed design for the delivery of 49 units by SOPHIA Housing Association on the Convent Site in Portlaoise will be presented to the Portlaoise MD members on 20th November 2019 in advance of the formal Part VIII process.

As previously advised 112 Syrian refugees have been identified by the Department of Justice and Equality for housing in Laois in 2019. Following successful negotiations, Cluid Housing Association agreed to be strategic partners on this project and the first four families arrived to Portlaoise on Tuesday 5th November. It is envisaged that most of the allocated families will be resettled in Laois by the end of the year.

The management and maintenance of existing housing units in accordance with the 2017 and 2019 regulations remains a core objective of the Housing Section. To date in 2019 over 2700 repair requests have been carried out by direct labour or through the use of competent contractors (Figure 3).

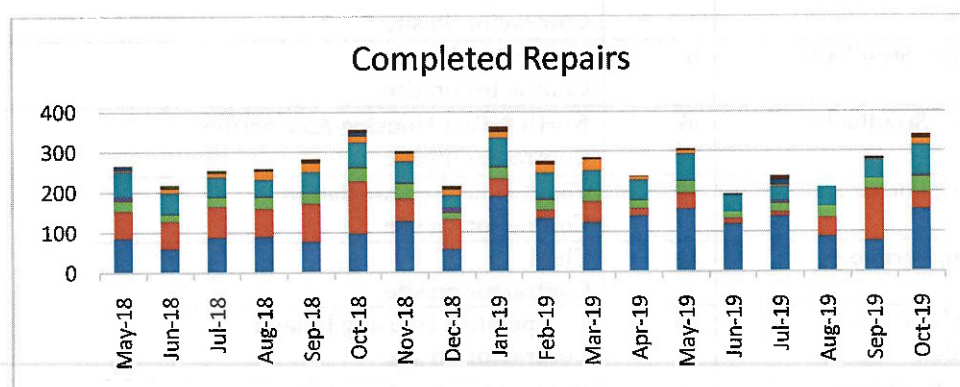


Figure 3: Completed repairs to Laois County Council housing units.

In addition to the above the Housing Section approved 65 Rebuilding Ireland Home Loans and nearly 200 housing adaptation grants to date in 2019. The Housing Assessment staff continue to process housing applications in accordance with the 2011 regulations in an efficient and effective manner and there are currently 780 approved applicants on the Council's housing list.

The number of homeless presentations has increased in 2019 and this remains a very challenging area. The Council will continue to respond to this challenge by increasing the staff resources available in 2020 with the recruitment of a social worker and making the HAP Placement Finder position a full-time role in Laois.

Planning Development and Control

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern Midlands Regional Assembly region was adopted in June 2019. Following on from this the County Development Plan for County Laois must commence its review process. This will commence in early 2020 and continue over a 2 year period.

The implementation of the Vacant Sites levy commenced in 2019 will progress through 2020 as sites have now been confirmed by An Bord Pleanála.

It is expected that 15 estates will have been taken in charge by the end of 2019 and it is anticipated that the Council will bring forward further estates in 2020 for taking in charge.

Heritage

As part of Budget 2020 the Heritage section has included proposals around the following initiatives:

- Preparation of a New Heritage Plan for the period 2020-2025
- Further enhancements to Old St. Peter's graveyard, Portlaoise
- Phase 2 of the Fort Protector
- Further works with Communities with respect to local graveyards
- Borris in Ossory Courthouse, the Fintan Lalor Homestead.

SERVICE DIVISION – ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & TOURISM SUPPORT

Economic Development

The Business Support Unit/Local Enterprise Office is currently working on the following:-

- Facade Enhancement Scheme
- Business Incentive Scheme
- Shopfront Grant Scheme
- Ongoing marketing of Laois through the Connect2laois Website.
- Ongoing work with Portlaoise Farmers Market
- Ongoing work with Downtown Portlaoise through Portlaoise Town Team
- Ongoing Marketing of Junction 17 National Enterprise Park
- Ongoing collaboration with Enterprise Centres in the County
- Development of Laois TASTE brand/Food Directory/Provenance Scheme for Food & Drinks Sector in Co. Laois.
- Collaboration with Laois Chamber
- Ongoing engagement with companies in relation to Brexit

Highlights to date include:

- €242,541 approved in grant aid with potential to create 47 new jobs
- €306,000 paid out in grant aid
- €60,923 approved in Trading Online Vouchers
- 44 training courses delivered with 561 participants
- 213 mentoring sessions assigned
- 9 companies participating in the Lean for Micro Programme

- Owner Managers from 10 Laois Companies took part in Management Development Programmes
- 138 one-to-one business advice sessions delivered
- 8 Laois Schools participating in the Student Enterprise Awards
- Laois represented at National Final of IBYE 2019 by Dr. Diane Cooper, top 24 out of 1,400 applications
- LEO successful in securing €143,000 under the LEO Competitive Fund to work with the Food Sector in the Midlands Region
- 23 Companies assigned mentors under the Business Advisor Fund
- Over 100 entrepreneurs/potential entrepreneurs attended events during Enterprise Week in March
- Facilitation of Midlands Food Strategy under the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan

SERVICE DIVISION – CLIMATE & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, HUMAN RESOURCES, CORPORATE AFFAIRS

Community Development

Laois Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) continued in 2019 to have a major impact on communities across Laois through a number of programmes and schemes, including the Community Enhancement Programme, from which 85 applicants were awarded a total fund of €136,524. Other initiatives Laois LCDC has spearheaded during the year include successful applications under the Healthy Ireland Fund, working with agency partners to implement health and well being initiatives in the county. The Committee also continues to monitor the community element of the Local Economic and Community Plan. Laois LCDC and Laois County Council supported a number of events held over the May Bank Holiday Weekend 4-6th May, as part of the Department of Rural and Community Development's "Big Hello!" National Community Weekend 2019. The events were aimed at promoting community cohesion and highlight the importance of knowing your neighbour and participating in your local community.

Under the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme, Laois LCDC monitored the implementation of actions in the 2019 Annual Plan with a budget of over €586,000.

Under the LEADER Programme, Laois LCDC has to date approved over 197 project applications and up to 50 claims for payment will be processed by year end.

This year has proved to be another strong year for Laois Public Participation Network (PPN). The PPN has added over 80 new groups registered with Laois PPN bringing the total number to 540. Over that period, in addition to regular newsletters to all PPN members, the PPN website was developed and successfully launched. A range of support and information events were organised by Laois PPN throughout the year. The PPN launched their Access for All Disability Report in May 2019.

This year has seen further progress under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme with the majority of the previously funded projects approaching completion. On October 31st this year the Department of Rural and Community Development announced a further tranche of funding totalling €437,761 for 5 community projects throughout the County.

Laois Age Friendly Alliance, the interagency committee tasked with delivering the Age Friendly Programme in Laois, delivered a range of initiatives including the addition of a number of Age Friendly Parking Spaces in County Laois (12 spaces to date), walkability audit in Mountrath. Laois Offaly Local Link have been shortlisted in the National Age Friendly Recognition and Achievement Awards 2019. The Laois Age Friendly Programme hosted the judges in September. The winners will be announced in November.

Coordinated by Foroige, in association with Laois County Council, the members of Laois Comhairle na nÓg were involved in consultations regarding the CYPSC consultation, RSE consultation, Active Schools consultation, LOETB Creative Ireland consultation and National recreation week consultation.

Laois County Council supported one entry in the 2019 IPB All-Island Pride of Place; Bloom HQ, Mountrath (Creative Place Initiative). Judging took place in July and results will be announced in November.

Laois Connects Mental Health and Wellbeing Awareness week took place in October 2019. 37 free events took place across the county. This was a hugely successful event organised by a multi-agency working group to raise awareness for positive mental health.

The Laois Community and Voluntary Awards 2019 took place in October 2019. Over 250 community representatives attended for a Gala Awards night in the Midlands Park Hotel Portlaoise.

The Community Section commenced in 2019 the coordinated resettlement of 112 refugees to Laois under the UNCHR Resettlement Programme.

Laois Africa Day took place on Saturday 1st June supported by Dept of Rural & Community Development in the sum of €10,871 and Laois County Council. The event saw live music featuring well know African and Irish musicians. There was children's entertainment, traditionally African drumming and tastes of Africa. In excess of 700 people attended on the day.

The "Skills at Work" Programme with Portlaoise College students took place during 2019. This as always is a very successful programme.

Arts Office

Under the Framework Agreement with the Arts Council, Laois Co Co met the objective to explore succession planning of the Laois School of Music and Music Generation Laois. Both of these ventures are now under the management of Laois Offaly Education and Training Board,(LOETB).

It was a successful year for the Laois Youth Theatre (LYT) branches in Portlaoise, catering for 12-14 year olds and 15-18 year olds culminated in a very successful collaborative production, with Mountrath Youth Theatre in May. 'Only Us' was a devised play from their own working of the famous novel Lord of the Flies; presented on 17th of May at the Dunamase Arts Centre. The newly established YT group in Mountrath (grant aided and supported by the Arts Office) has flourished during the year.

The Summer Arts programme and artists-in-schools have run very successfully in the county during the year. A new addition to our Summer programme this year was a Portfolio Preparation Course for young people aged 15-18, interested in pursuing art at 3rd level. Mary Burke, visual artist, ran the weeklong programme in Portlaoise attracting attendance from local students and also one student who travelled from Dublin to attend.

A range of events continued at the Arts House Stradbally. The annual summer programme included two series of two-day courses for adults at Laois Arthouse entitled, 'Painting the Portrait from Life', with artist Una Sealy RHA, that focussed on the process of painting a portrait from life attracting 18 students from all parts of the country. This is one example of the Arts programme interacting with the Tourism potential of the county; it also demonstrates the quality of the Arts programming being provided for the people of County Laois.

Mountmellick hosted the 'Free Market' tour, from 5-7 September.

"Free Market" was the Irish National Pavilion at the 16th International Architecture Exhibition, won widespread acclaim for its exploration of the unique identity of Irish rural towns when it showed in Venice in 2018. Mountmellick hosted the 'Free Market' tour, from 5-7 September. The pavilion was located in Ó Connell Square with accompanying exhibition in Ó Connell House on the square. In Mountmellick the focus on the curators talks was on public realm design.. The event was greatly assisted by local groups.

This year Laois Tourism with funding from the LEADER programme have joined with the Arts Office in promoting the Leaves (Autumn Literature) Festival in Portlaoise ; this is a further example of the Arts Office working alongside tourism interests for the joint benefit of the county.

The Youth Club in Portarlinton assisted in managing the screening of 'Into the West' as part of the the Cruinniú na nÓg events in June. They have come on board to manage the screening of 'Into the West' in Portarlinton as part of the Culture Night in September.

Recreation, Play and Sport

Programmes promoting physical activity through recreation continued in 2019 in association with Laois Sports Partnership, including National Bike Week, Games on the Green, National Recreation Week, Active Parks programme, Healthy Ireland and the Outdoor Urban Adventure Programme,.

Portlaoise and Portarlington Leisure Centres continued to deliver excellent service to the people of Laois in 2019. A review of operations and governance has been commissioned by Laois County Council to guide future direction and investment. Funding had been sought under Large Scale Sporting Infrastructure Programme for pool re-furbishment works at Portarlington Leisure Centre.

Twenty play facilities continue to be managed and maintained by Laois County Council. An accessibility audit on three playgrounds will be completed by the end of November 2019 and funding has been secured Department of Children and Youth Affairs to carry out accessibility improvements in three play areas. Laois County Council are currently assisting community groups in Borris-in-Ossory and Ballinakill to support the development of new play areas in 2020. Parks in both Portlaoise and Portarlington were awarded the Green Flag Award in July 2019.

Recreation and amenity infrastructural development in Laois continued in 2019 under a number of schemes. Under the Outdoor Recreational Infrastructural Scheme (ORIS) a new Slí na Sláinte walking route was opened in Mountrath with an additional Slí route to be completed in Borris-in Ossory by end of 2019. Town and Village renewal projects to be completed by the end of 2019 include the ongoing development of the People's Park Campus, Portarlington, installation of lighting at St Fergal's Walking Track, Rathdowney and the construction of an amenity area in Borris-in-Ossory.

Under CLÁR 2019 Measure 2, funding was awarded to Camross National School to develop sporting infrastructure and Measure 3 funding was secured for a sensory play garden in Coolrain.

While delivering on recreation, play and sporting programmes we will develop a further focus on groups with lower participation levels in line with Laois County Council's Recreation Play and Sports Strategy 2018-2022. down of funding under the Sports Capital Grant Scheme and other funding streams.

Climate

In September this year the Council adopted the Climate Change Adaptation Strategy. In August this year the Government published the National Climate Action Plan. Recognising that addressing climate change will also involve the general public, responsibility for co-ordinating Climate Action has been allocated internally to the Community Section.

Human Resources

There has been an increasingly high level of recruitment activity during the year arising from retirements, resignations and some centrally funded positions. This is reflective of enhanced work programmes, and a high degree of mobility within the local authority sector generally.

43 recruitment competitions have been held year to date in 2019. This resulted in a total of 794 applications received, with 618 candidates to date being called to interview (including shortlisting interviews). Further recruitment will continue to year end as required.

A total of 104 staff appointments have been made to date in 2019

Corporate Services

Receptions

The Members of Laois County Council accorded Receptions to the following during 2019:

Civic Receptions

13 th February 2019	Mr. Tommy Treacy
3 rd October 2019	Portlaoise Musical Society

Cathaoirleach Receptions

17 th January 2019	Durrow Development Forum
28 th February 2019	Ossory Show
21 st March 2019	Stradbally Community Games

Annual Service Delivery Plan

The Annual Service Delivery Plan for 2019 was adopted by the Members at their meeting held on 28th January 2019. Work will commence on preparing the 2020 Plan in the coming weeks.

Library Services

The Library service continues to play a pivotal role for all communities in Co. Laois. They offer an efficient frontline service for all members providing them with access to books, media, online services and internet/wifi.

The libraries work with many groups within their communities and offer a varied events and exhibitions programme. By the end of this year, we expect that there will have been over 2100 events hosted across the County in different libraries. Highlights include author visits, knitting groups, ciorcal comhrá and book clubs, while the art galleries in both Mountmellick and Abbeyleix remain very popular venues for hosting art, cultural and educational exhibitions.

The Library Service has continued with a strong programme of activities for children, including Science week, computer classes, chess clubs, Lego workshops and storytelling sessions. Lego animation classes continued for 2019 in Abbeyleix and Durrow libraries and the children were assisted to produce another series of animated videos where the children wrote the stories, produced the scene sets in Lego, created animated videos using technology and provided the voiceovers to the video characters. The completed films will be screened to a public audience in the Dunamase theatre on Saturday November 30th 2019

Summer Reading Challenge

Laois County Library Service has organised a summer reading challenge and this year we participated in the national Summer Reading Programme supported by the LGMA Libraries Development Unit. This initiative was funded by Laois County Council. The event is for primary school children to promote literacy development and encourage non

readers to engage with books. This project has gone from strength to strength and this year a total of 1656 children registered for the competition which was an increase of 38 % on the previous year. During the summer period over 3776 children attended the events and literacy themed activities to promote the library

Dormant Accounts Funding

Laois County Library services were awarded a €13,500 grant from the Dormant Accounts Fund for pilot projects to marginalised groups in the Community. Autism Friendly Library Services are being rolled out in 3 libraries. The Library of Sanctuary is being piloted in Portlaoise library- an initiative that seeks to promote a culture of welcome to those seeking refuge and in Direct provision.

Capital Development

Portlaoise Library

Portlaoise new library is continuing to progress. In July 2019 the construction and demolition element of the new library project went to tender.. Departmental approval was received in October 2019 and a contractor appointment is imminent.

Rathdowney Library roof repair and replacement

A consultant Engineer has been appointed to the project . Detailed site investigations of the current roof and building have been completed. Detailed drawings and construction specifications for the project are drafted . The contract for this project will be advertised for tender by early December 2019.

**SERVICE DIVISION – ROADS/TRANSPORTATION, ENVIRONMENT, WATER
SERVICES, FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES.**

Roads/Transportation

The public road network for County Laois is summarised in Table 1 below:

Road Category	Kms
Motorway	63.0
National Secondary	100.2
Regional	348.4
Local	1,845.4
Total Network	2,357.0

Table 1 Road Network Categories

Map Road/Pavement Management System

All DTTAS grant allocations, from 2014 onwards, are governed by a Pavement Surface Evaluation and Rating System. This provides for a consistent approach to the evaluation of pavement conditions across the state. In turn the pavement evaluation and rating system enables the prioritisation of schemes for inclusion in works programmes etc.

Such evaluation and rating systems form part of an overall road management system that will include for maintenance of the road schedule, project details, bridge management data, road opening licences and administration of state grants associated with the maintenance and improvement of the road asset.

In terms of the Pavement Surface Evaluation and Rating System I confirm that surveys have been conducted in County Laois since 2014 associated with the Local Primary and Local Tertiary Network.

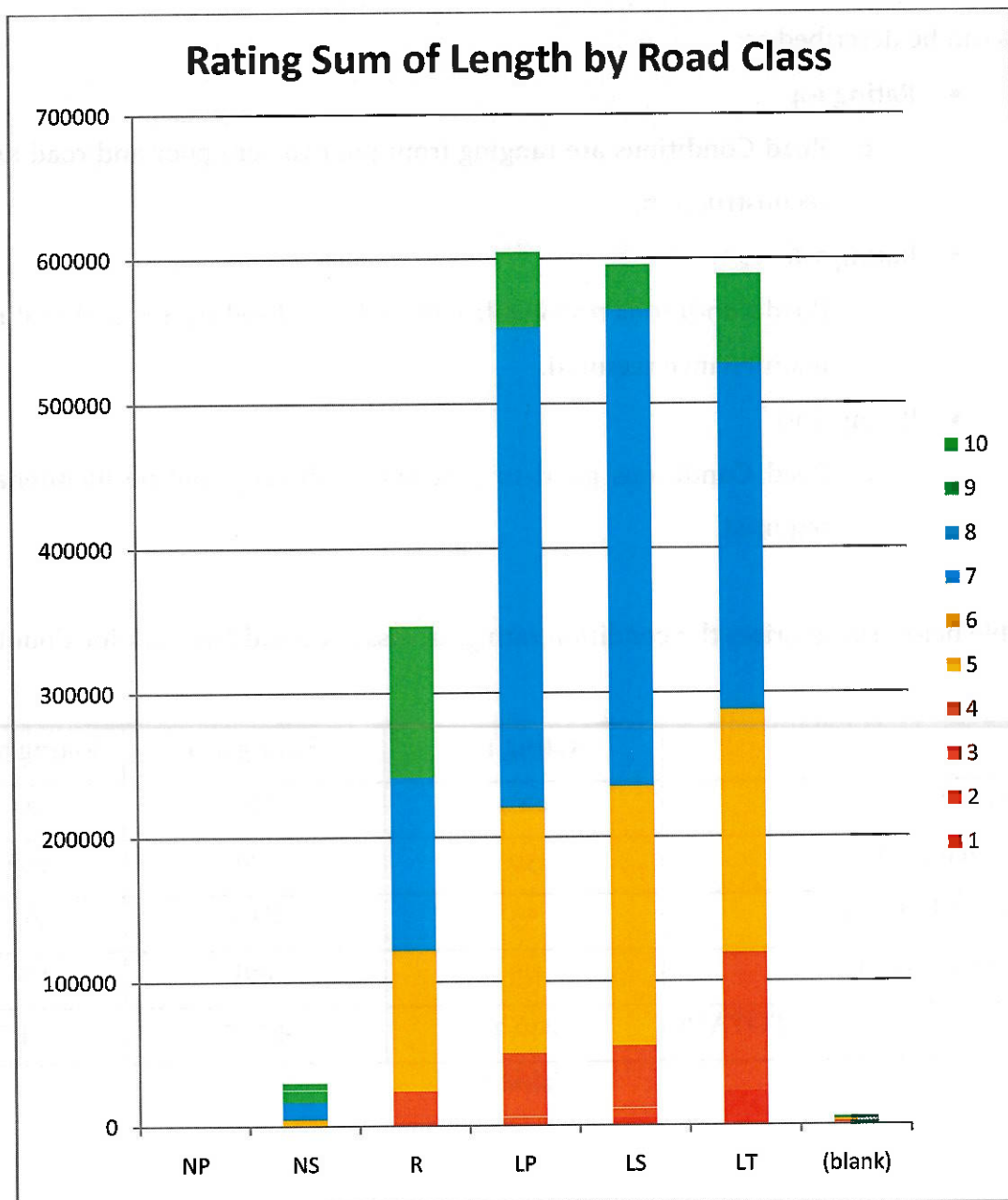
Ratings can be described as:

- Rating 1-4
 - Road Conditions are ranging from poor to very poor and road needs reconstruction.
- Rating 5-6
 - Road Conditions reasonable with only localised repairs and routine maintenance required.
- Rating 7-10
 - Road Conditions good to excellent with only routine maintenance required.

The Table below summarises the condition ratings across the Road Network for County Laois.

	Rating 1-4	Rating 5-6	Rating 7-10
Regional (R)	22.2	46.3	225
Local Primary (LP)	50	170	378
Local Secondary (LS)	55	83.3	362
Local Tertiary (LT)	119	168	436
TOTALS	246.2	468.6	964.7

Table 2



2019 Budget Allocation & 2020 Planned Works

The following points are worthy of note:

- 2019 Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) Grants for National Road Improvement and Maintenance total €2,710,000 compared to €1,144,438 in 2018, a €1.6M increase. Contractors have been appointed to construct the N80 Maidenhead realignment Scheme with work commenced in August of 2019. The overall value of this scheme

is €6.5M. It is expected that this project will be completed and fully open to traffic by Q4 of 2020.

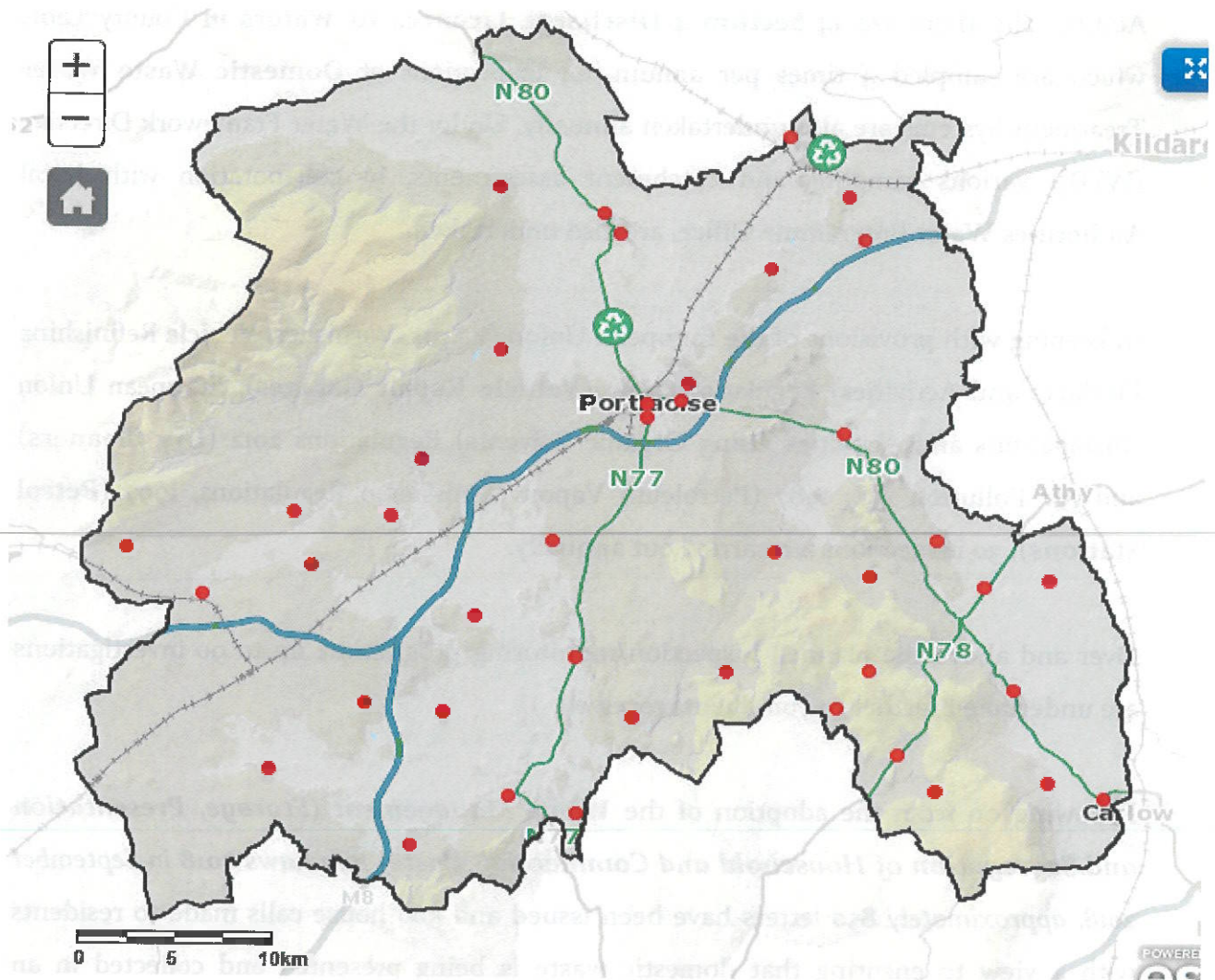
- Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport grant allocations for the Non-National Road Network total €14.6M for 2019 as compared to € 11.4M in 2018, an increase of almost €3.2M – much of this increase relates to the costs incurred with the completion of the Portlaoise Circular Route. This scheme is completed and opened formally to traffic on 1st November 2019.
- Laois County Council own funds are provided under our County Roads Maintenance heading, 2020's allocation for County Roads maintenance is proposed at €1,300,000.
- In relation to Regional and Local Road Strengthening and Maintenance it is expected that we will carry out 30km Of strengthening works and 30km Of surface dressing resurfacing works across the road network in accordance with the road ratings as mentioned above.
- Public Lighting costs are remaining same as 2019. 1200 55SOX high energy lights have been replaced with energy efficient LED lights in 2019. This will yield savings in terms of energy efficiencies made.
- Community Involvement Scheme funding was continued in 2019 to the value of €456,000 – We anticipate similar levels of funding in 2019. The following CIS's were completed in 2019 with LCC's own contribution:
 - Woodview Estate in Stradbally
 - St. Brigid's Place Portlaoise
- Bridge Improvement Works are funded under DTTAS Specific Improvement Grant of €260k. We have made an application for similar funding for 2020.
- Funding to the value of €241,871 has been received from the DRCD in relation to the Local Improvement Schemes in Laois in 2019 – we would expect similar funding in 2020.
- DTTAS allocated €456,000 towards roadside drainage works as well.

- Laois County Council allocated €304,000 to River Maintenance & Drainage works from our own funds in 2019.
 - Comprises funding for Barrow Drainage and Nore & Goul Drainage
 - Shift to multi annual work programme planning commenced in 2019 to better take into account ecological, biodiversity and legislative requirements.
- Proposals regarding the revisions to the road space on the Abbeyleix Road from Junction 17 to Portlaoise Town will be brought before the Councillors as a Part 8 in early 2020. The proposals will seek to rebalance the public realm by improving pedestrian and cycle facilities while creating an appropriate entry to the county town.
- The feasibility study for the Mountmellick Relief Road will be progressed to completion by end Q1 2020.
- URDF Projects under Portlaoise – A Low Carbon Town will be progressed. These projects include;
 - Installation of Electric Vehicle charging points
 - Conversion of existing public lighting to new low energy lighting
 - Delivery of the Triogue Blueway

Environment

Laois County Council operates two **Civic Amenity Sites** (Portlaoise, Portarlinton), both of which will be out of contract in 2020 and require re-tendering. The re-tendering for these services will be conducted in Q1 2020.

There are now **43 Bring Bank Centres** made available by Laois County Council for the recycling of domestic glass and metal food and drink packaging waste. These facilities are free to use and seek to encourage sustainable waste management and waste disposal practices. A further three sites have been lost in the past two years, and the location of suitable alternative sites in those communities has been difficult, notwithstanding that the Council continues to seek agreement for replacement sites.



The Recommended Minimum Criteria for Environmental Inspections provides the backdrop against which Laois County Council agrees an annual schedule of environmental audits, inspections and monitoring. There are currently **13 Waste Facility Permits** operational throughout County Laois and **1 Certificate of Registration**. Inspections of these facilities are undertaken 2 to 4 times per annum depending on the risk rating of the waste.

Additionally there are **14 Section 4 Discharge Licences to Waters** in County Laois which are sampled 4 times per annum. 24 inspections of **Domestic Waste Water Treatment Systems** are also undertaken annually. Under the Water Framework Directive (WFD), various sampling and catchment assessments, in collaboration with Local Authorities Water Programme Office, are also undertaken.

In keeping with provisions of the European Union (Paints, Varnishes, Vehicle Refinishing Products and Activities) Regulations 2012 (**Vehicle Repair Garages**), European Union (Installations and Activities Using Organic Solvents) Regulations 2012 (**Dry Cleaners**) and Air Pollution Act, 1987 (Petroleum Vapour Emissions) Regulations, 1997 (**Petrol Stations**), 30 inspections are carried out annually.

Over and above the planned inspection/monitoring programme up to 90 investigations are undertaken further to complaints received.

Following on from the adoption of the ***Waste Management (Storage, Presentation and Segregation of Household and Commercial Waste) Bye Laws 2018*** in September 2018, approximately 850 letters have been issued and 500 house calls made to residents with a view to ensuring that domestic waste is being presented and collected in an authorised and legitimate manner.

Laois County Council continues to work with **Community Groups** in keeping the County clean and tidy. The Council recognises that litter continues to be a challenge locally and nationally. The Litter Management Plan, adopted in 2018, outlines the objectives to prevent and control litter, encourage public awareness and sets targets over a three year period. The Environment Section continued in their efforts in 2019 to achieve the objectives of the Plan. In the first nine months of 2019 the Council collected 330 tonnes of illegally deposited material, a considerable increase on the previous year. The practice of using mobile CCTV camera to detect and deter illegal dumping has continued and the

Council will continue to prosecute offenders whenever it finds sufficient evidence for prosecution.

This year the Council held a number of Anti-Dumping Initiatives with financial assistance from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. Other Anti-Dumping initiatives carried out in 2019 were Green Space cleanups with follow up Household Waste inspections and Brown Bin Campaign.

The Couch and Mattress Amnesty, undertaken by Laois County Council in August 2019, was a huge success. Thirty-five articulated trucks containing 2,403 mattresses, 1150 couches and 1,325 armchairs were collected and removed from the three pick-up sites at Portlaoise, Ballylinan and Rathdowney.

Laois County Council held an inaugural agricultural competition, **Chairman's Award for Good Environmental Practice on the Farm** to recognise farmers for the excellent work and good environmental practices that farmers carry out on a daily basis on their farms. The competition was open to all farmers of lands based in Co. Laois. A no. of entries were received from dairy, beef and tillage farmers in the county. Prizes were awarded at the April meeting of the Council. This competition will be held again in 2020.

The **National Tidy Towns** results were announced on Monday the 30th September 2019. Once again significant progress was made by the local Tidy Towns groups that submitted applications to the national competition. Among the successful entries were Abbeyleix who were awarded a Gold Medal, Portlaoise (Silver) and Ballinakill (Endeavour Award).

In 2020, further to the provisions of this Budget, the Environment Department will:

- Continue to improve on its Environmental Protection, Waste Management, Enforcement and Litter Management duties.
- Continue its environmental monitoring, maintenance and aftercare regime at the Kyletalesha Landfill Facility to ensure compliance with EPA licence requirements.
- Develop, submit and agree with the EPA an Environmental Inspection Plan (RMCEI) which will detail the framework of environmental inspection targets to be undertaken during the

year. The Council will also report on its performance against the stated targets in the 2019 RMCEI plan in relation to the achievement of environmental objectives and outcomes.

- Retender the contracts for the management and operation of the Portlaoise & Portarlinton Civic Amenity Sites.
- Partake in the tendering process for the collection of glass and cans from the bring banks of the four Midlands Counties, including Offaly, Westmeath, Laois and Longford.

Water Services

Laois County Council continues to provide public water and wastewater services to the people of Co. Laois, in collaboration with Irish Water (the statutory Water Services Authority), through a Service Level Agreement (SLA) and in accordance with an agreed Annual Service Plan (ASP). In line with the SLA/ASP annual costs incurred by Laois County Council are recouped by the Council from Irish Water.

In terms of Irish Water's strategic capital investment it is of note that, in 2020, 3 additional boreholes will be brought into production on a phased basis to augment and enhance the resilience of the Portlaoise Public Water Supply.

Laois County Council remains the statutory Water Services Authority for Group Schemes (GWS), Private Wells, and Domestic Wastewater Treatment Systems (Septic tanks). Funding is provided each year to administer a grant and subsidy scheme under the Rural Water Programme and to provide advice and support to the Group Water sector in the county so as to continue to maintain a high quality water supply in line with the European Union (Drinking Water) Regulations 2014.

Some highlights in Rural Water in 2019 were:

- Water Quality in Group Water Schemes is compliant with the EU (Drinking Water) Regulations 2014.

- Under the 2016 – 2018 Multi Annual Rural Water Programme enhancements and upgrades to the Group Water Supplies at Ballacolla, Ballypickas, Derrynaseers, Heath and Ironmills were completed.
- Taking in Charge of Public GWSs at Moyanna and Ballyrider and
- arrangements are ongoing for the taking in charge in 2020 of schemes at Moyadd (3), The Rock, Kilbride, Dereen, Lea Road 1 and 2, Clonanny 1 and 2, Lower Lea, Ullard and Ballylahane 1.

Laois County received funding of just under €3m under the Multi Annual Rural Water Programme 2019 to 2021. Whilst the allocations for water conservation measures were disappointing the main focus of the 2019-2021 Programme is on water quality and the majority of funding sought in that regard was approved. In partnership with the various local groups/schemes and, in recognition that water quality standards pertaining to this sector are very high in County Laois, the Council will seek to collaborate so as to assist the sector in enhancing energy efficiency and this process will commence with some audits on current actual energy consumption.

Laois County Council continues to sample and monitor all GWSs under the EU (Drinking Water) Regulations 2014 as amended.

Laois County Council's **INAB accredited Laboratory** continues to enhance its accreditation status and has added Offaly County Council to its customer base. In 2020, it is proposed to further increase the customer base.

The Water Services section submitted proposals under a Departmental Programme to resolve legacy issues associated with Developer Provided Water Services Infrastructure. Laois County Council's application related to Killenard Lodge and Bruach na hAbhann (Killeen, Maganey).

Fire and Emergency Services

With 8 Fire Stations and total numbers at 81 across all ranks we will continue to maintain and improve the service we deliver to the public. Co. Laois is the fastest growing county by population in Ireland. This, combined with the economic upturn will lead to an increased demand in all areas of activity.

The growth in population in Co. Laois will see additional fire prevention & community fire safety programmes delivering safer communities throughout Co. Laois.

As a result of the improvement in the economy, economic development has increased over the last number of years, and it is anticipated that this upward trend will continue in 2020. Laois County Council has seen an increase in fire safety applications year on year, from 37 in 2016 to 68 in 2019 & it is anticipated this will increase in 2020, which will place additional demands on resources to deliver this service.

With an increase in population & development, the demand led element of Laois County Fire & Rescue Service will also see an increase in activity. Severe weather events, the growth in population and increased economic development have given rise to a recent upward trend of approximately 7% annually in the number of operational incidents attended by Laois County Fire & Rescue Service.

Fire-Fighter training is increasing in line with new national QQI training programmes & enhanced fire-fighter safety standards.

New enhanced personal protective clothing standards for fire-fighters comes into place in 2020 and this budget ensures that Laois County Council will comply with these new standards, front end loading a PPE replacement programme which will ultimately improve fire-fighter safety and lead to reductions in PPE costs in subsequent years.

5 of the 8 fire station in Laois are in excess of 50 years old & not energy efficient. In accordance with Laois County Council's Climate Adaption Policy this Budget will enable the upgrade of 3 of the Fire Stations with new energy management control systems and window replacement, reducing energy consumption and organisational carbon footprint.

Major Emergency Management continues to be enhanced with the upgrading of facilities in Co. Hall to manage both major emergency & severe weather events, which will ultimately enable Laois County Council to further improve the management of severe weather & major emergency events.

Laois Civil Defence continues to support Laois County Council and the Principal Response Agencies. The Civil Defence also supports local communities and events on an ongoing basis, as appropriate. Strategically and taking account of both logistical and operational requirements a centrally located facility in Portlaoise will enable Laois Civil Defence to locate all assets in one centrally located facility and to thereby deliver consistent, centralised training, to expand recruitment and deliver an enhanced service to the people of County Laois.

