

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL  
COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE



DRÉACHT BUISÉID 2022

DRAFT BUDGET 2022

## LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL - 2022 BUDGET

**To:     *An Cathaoirleach and Each Member of Laois County Council***

Dear Councillor,

As we strive to pull through the pandemic of the past twenty months it remains the case that there is a backdrop of uncertainty to the planning and preparation of the 2022 Revenue Budget for Laois County Council. The uncertainty stems from a number of factors, such as, the future trajectory of the virus and its impact on local economic and social wellbeing, the capacity of the Council to generate additional income from traditional sources of revenue, the ongoing impacts of Brexit and constraints on the Central Government purse following a period of national debt expansion.

The 2022 Draft Revenue Budget provides for an expenditure of **€88,337,000**.

This is to be funded as follows;

- Local Property Tax Allocation : **€9,065,150 (10.3%)**
- Commercial Rates : **€14,662,952 (16.6%)**
- Government Grants : **€40,768,900 (46.1%)**
- Goods and Services : **€23,839,998 (27%)**

### **BUDGET CONTEXT 2022**

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic the Members have been regularly updated regarding its impact on the finances of Laois County Council and its capacity to deliver much needed public services. The support of Central Government has been vital to the ongoing business and operations of the Local Authority sector over the past two years.

In 2020 Laois County Council received €5,987,788 by way of commercial rates waiver, it also received just over €1 million in respect of loss of income from goods and services and in recouping the Council for additional expenditure in managing and responding to the Covid-19 pandemic generally.

In the current year, 2021, the level of rates waiver support amounts to €3.3 million to the end of quarter 3. The Q4 2021 waiver will apply to businesses in the hospitality, leisure, entertainment and tourism related sectors. The Council continues to incur Covid-19 related expenditure in areas such as workplace safety, upgrading of information technology and communications systems, supporting business and community resilience and assisting partner agencies in the public health response to Covid-19. There have been losses in income in the revenue stream areas of parking fees, library services, road opening licences and through the Council's associated Companies in leisure and arts facilities. This is estimated at € 800,000.

Looking towards 2022 there is a reasonable assumption that further Government support for Laois County Council will reduce significantly as business and enterprises return to near normal function and as the risk of further lockdowns across society diminishes. Indeed, at this time there is no indication of an extension of the commercial rates waiver scheme for 2022. The Council is also vigilant to the inevitability of increased business vacancy rates in the county and this will give rise to further uncollectable income from this source next year. Furthermore, it should be noted that while quite a volume of business is now done online there is no mechanism open to Laois County Council to charge commercial rates in respect of such business.

Quite apart from Covid-19 related issues it is apparent that price inflation in the energy, construction products and public tendering sectors will impact on the financial health of the Council for 2022.

- Inflation for 2022 is forecast at 2.9% (*Central Bank of Ireland, Q4 Quarterly Bulletin, 2021*)
- Tender prices nationally jumped by 7% in first half of 2021. (*scsi*)
- Energy prices have increased by 20 to 25%

In addition, there will be short term difficulties in the supply chain mainly associated with current global developments and Brexit complications. This will affect the business operations of Laois County Council and will give rise to some cost increases.



Notwithstanding the paragraphs above it remains the case that a balanced budget must be presented for the consideration of the Elected Members. On the assumption that Government supports will reduce markedly through 2022 and on the assumption that the vast majority of businesses will continue to trade albeit at different levels activity when compared to 2019, the budgetary tables attaching to this report are presented in balance for 2022. Members should note there has been a critical examination of spending in all service areas in order to provide balanced budget arithmetic.

The last number of Budgets have been prepared with a view towards providing a business/community stimulus effect in the local economy. The 2022 Budget remains focussed on that effort but is also very much a “steady as you go” statement given the relatively unprecedented and unpredictable environment in which it has been prepared.

In summary the 2022 Revenue Budget aims to:-

- (i) Provide assistance and support to those in need of homes and to those most at risk of homelessness;
- (ii) Continue to stimulate economic and business recovery through local development and investment infrastructure and business supports generally;
- (iii) Promote County Laois as a location of preference for remote working and environmentally friendly tourism;
- (iv) Promote a clean and pristine environment conducive to a good standard of public health and wellbeing and in particular, to build on the excellent work in bringing Portlaoise to the status of Ireland’s cleanest Town;
- (v) Make provision for the many challenges to be addressed under the Climate Action Plan

#### **THE BUDGET PROCESS**

The attached Budget for the financial year 2022 has been prepared in accordance with statutory format for consideration by the Elected Members. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage by Circular Fin 16/2021, dated 06/09/2021 determined the period November 1st to November 30<sup>th</sup> as the prescribed period for County Councils to hold their 2022 Statutory Budget Meetings.

Laois County Council's statutory budget meeting is scheduled to take place on Monday, 8<sup>th</sup> November 2021 at 11.00am. The process of considering and adopting the Budget must be concluded before November 21<sup>st</sup> 2021.

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 statutory Annual Budget meeting.

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. As was the case last year the estimated income from such sources is based on less than certain assumptions. 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 and that some appeals to the VO remain to be determined.

#### **RESERVED FUNCTIONS OF ELECTED MEMBERS**

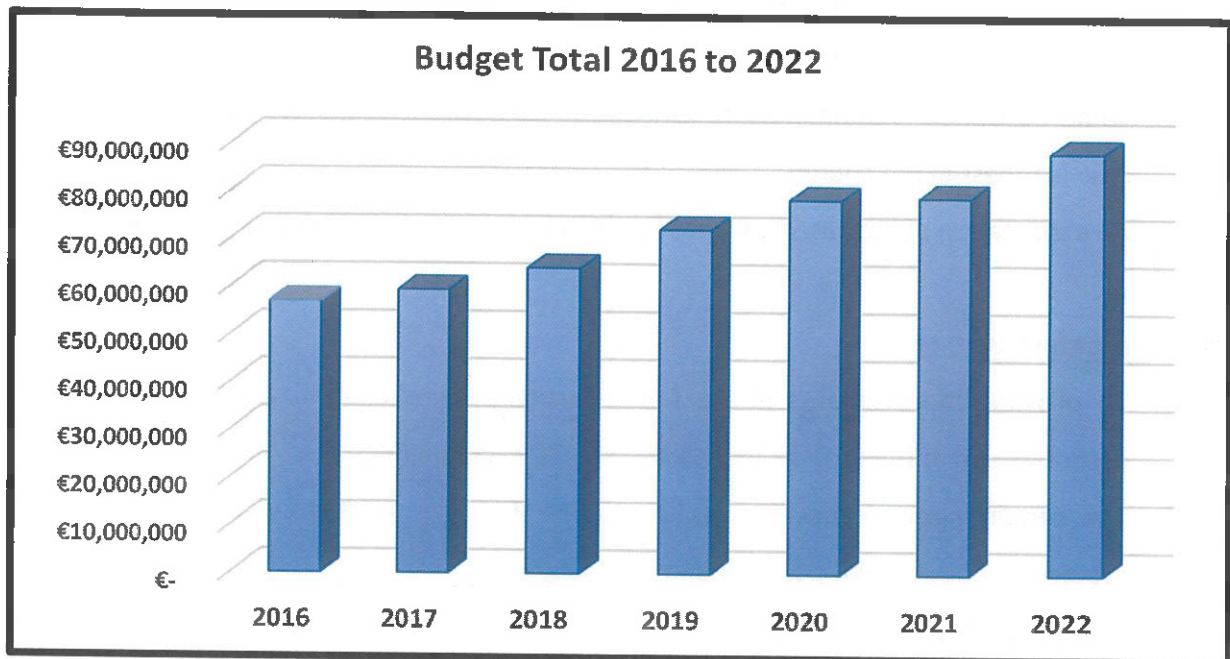
The members have a number of reserved functions in relation to the budgetary process as follows:

- (i) They have the power to vary the Local Property Tax Rate (LPT) by a factor of plus or minus 15%. At the July 28th Special Meeting of the Council the Elected Members made a decision not to change the LPT as it applied in 2020 and 2021. i.e, that it remains varied at plus 10%.
- (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 2022 MAIN POINTS**

Over the past number of years there has been a steady increase in revenue expenditure and investment into services provided by the local authority in County Laois. Notwithstanding the difficult operating environment this trend is continued in 2022 and the Revenue Budget for members' consideration now stands at €88.337 million, an increase of €9.454 million over 2021 and €31.547 million over the 2016 Budget.

## REVENUE BUDGET 2016-2022



Laois County Council continues to exercise prudent budgetary oversight and sound financial management over all aspects of its spending. The anticipated credit going into 2022 will stand at approximately €100,000.

The main factors that shape the drafting of the 2022 budget have been detailed in the introduction to this report, other factors are listed below.

### On the income side:

1. An assumption of a rebound in business and retail resulting in a reasonable yield from commercial rates
2. Retaining an increased income from the Local Property Tax, as in 2021, in the amount of €506,273.

3. An increase of €483,000 from rents on Council owned houses mainly as a result of increased housing stock in the Councils ownership.
4. Broadly similar allocations to Laois County Council under the non-national roads programme as compared with 2021
5. Some buoyancy in commercial rates income, particularly from large utility providers and new business in the county.
6. An expectation of increased vacancy levels in certain retail and business sectors

#### On the expenditure side

1. To provide improvements in the County's main towns and villages including a more extensive use of the CPO process to acquire derelict buildings.
2. The requirement to continue a planned maintenance programme to address heating system and other upgrades in Council housing stock.
3. A requirement to provide matched funding to support a number of projects and initiatives including,
  - a. the Town and Village Renewal Schemes
  - b. The Rural Regeneration Development and Urban Regeneration Fund projects
  - c. the Fáilte Ireland Tourism Destination Towns scheme
  - d. CLAR programmes
4. The requirement to meet targets and develop actions to comply with Public Sector obligations in the Climate Action Plan 2019.
5. The requirement to provide support to business and tourism recovery in the county.

The Annual Budget for 2022 provides for a significant and continued level of investment in the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of County Laois. The gross revenue expenditure required to run public services in Laois on a day to day basis is €88.337 million representing an increase of 12% in comparison with 2021.



The following areas of expenditure are of particular note:

- **€270,500** additional expenditure over 2021 on the maintenance of Council housing units and to include the recruitment of additional tradesmen and apprentices to assist with relets, maintenance and other areas of housing activity;
- The budget provides **€46,000** towards the recruitment of additional technical staff to fully resource an expanded role by Laois County Council in tackling dereliction/vacancy;
- Provision of **€1,304,000** for local road maintenance;
- A sum of **€225,000** towards the continuance of activities at Council owned Leisure Centres including support for Ballinakill swimming pool;
- Provision of **€207,000** towards matched funding for urban renewal in Portlaoise and Portarlinton;
- Additional funding of **€23,000** towards heritage projects on churches and graveyards, Tinnakill Heritage House, heritage works in Donaghmore and Rathdowney and a biodiversity action plan;
- A sum of **€20,000** in respect of preparations for the world ploughing championship;
- Provision of an additional **€40,000** towards maintaining standards in street cleanliness;
- A book fund of **€25,000** in respect of the new County Library;
- A provision of **€89,000** towards ensuring that Laois County Council can monitor and protect its IT systems against cyber attacks;
- Provision of an additional sum of **€39,000** for community projects to be decided at Municipal District level;
- An additional **€41,000** for unfinished housing estates;
- An extra **€30,000** towards climate change and flooding;
- An additional **€24,500** for maintenance of playgrounds;
- **€10,500** for green schools;
- Provision of a sum of **€10,000** towards feasibility of municipal indoor sports arena;

- Continued support for small businesses through the rates incentive and vacant property incentive schemes.

### **THE FUNDING OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN LAOIS**

The combination of the retained Local Property Tax and the distribution of the Equalization fund amount to €9,065,150 for Laois County Council in 2022.

Members at municipal level have decided the detail of General Municipal Allocation apportionment in the 2022 municipal works schedule and a sum of €437,000 has been included between the three districts. A sum of €75,000 has been included for specific municipal works (€25k per district), to be decided at each municipal district. Members also have a role in the discretionary maintenance of non- national roads and the amount under this heading will be made known by the Department of Transport and Transport Infrastructure Ireland early next year.

Commercial rates remain the Council's most important source of locally generated income and are budgeted at €14,495,092 for 2022. The increase in rates income, at €399,716 for 2022, is due mainly to a rates liability to large utilities 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.

### **COMMERCIAL RATES AND SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESS**

In 2020 the Government introduced the Business Restart Grant Scheme and the Business Restart Grant Plus Scheme to support commercial micro, small and medium business. Using funding provided through Enterprise Ireland, Laois County Council paid out €7.693 million to 1,381 businesses in the County that had a rateable business and that experienced loss of turnover due to the pandemic. In addition to the above Laois County Council administered the Small Business Assistance Scheme targeted at companies, self-employed and sole traders. A sum of €228k has been paid out to 63 companies/traders.

No.	Rate Band	Amount
365	Less €1,000	€229,534
425	€1,000 - €2,000	€618,277
536	€2,000 - €5,000	€1,744,609
202	€5,000 - €10,000	€1,424,643
111	€10,000 - €25,000	€1,646,268
74	€25,000 plus	€8,999,621
1,713		€14,662,952

#### **Commercial Rates Categories by Rate Band**

There is no change to the commercial rate for 2022. 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 originally introduced in 2016 so that all rate payers, operating viable business during the pandemic, that are liable for an annual rate payment of €10,000 or less will receive a benefit of a 4% rebate in 2022 where rate bills are paid promptly and in full. Small business accounts for around 80% of rate payers 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. Designated areas are located at Portlaoise, Portarlington, Mountmellick, Stradbally, Abbeyleix, Rathdowney, Mountrath, Durrow and Borris in Ossory.
- The retention of the "Shop Front" scheme whereby property owners can avail of a €750 grant.
- Continuation of the paint enhancement scheme in Portarlington.

## 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 has been evident for a number of years. The current reporting relationships with State Departments are summarised as follows;

1. Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; 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 Natural and built landscape, structures at risk funding.
2. Department of Transport: Matters relating to Rural Roads and public transport, Non National Roads Funding,
3. Department of Environment Climate and Communications. 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: Matters relating to flood relief and flood defence capital projects, historical buildings,
7. Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht; Matters relating to Biodiversity, Creative Ireland, Arts, Sports Capital,
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 (coming to an end in 2026 and currently subject to comprehensive review)
- The Food Safety Authority of 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 2022 Budget.



## **BUDGET 2022 ... MAIN DELIVERY PRIORITIES FOR LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL**

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 year ahead.

### **HOUSING SUPPLY AND ACCOMMODATION**

The provision of new social housing and accommodation remains, as ever, a top priority for Laois County Council for 2022 and thereafter. The Council's strategy and action plan for the delivery of social and affordable housing for the next five years will align fully with "*Housing for All, A new Housing Plan for Ireland*", launched by Government in early September , 2021.

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 seven pathways of "Housing for All" 2022 to 2026.

The Council's housing programme is on course to deliver **over 1,092 homes** in the period 2016 to end of 2021. This is well in excess of the targets 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 4 years, these resources are further set to expand in 2022, 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 (10 percent social, 10 percent affordable) and affordable housing.

The Council continues to make steady progress under this programme and is on course to provide homes to **220 families** in the current year.

It may be beneficial in the context of the consideration of the 2022 Revenue Budget to gauge delivery for each of the past 6 years and to note proposals for delivery of housing and accommodation to the end of 2021.

	Relets	LCC Acquisitions	LCC Construct	Voids	AHB Delivery	Leasing	Totals
2016	70	16		12	32	14	144
2017	65	47	1	4	50	47	214
2018	45	24	33	2	58	6	168
2019	50	42	7	5	10	8	122
2020	62	20	27	5	95	15	224
2021	56	20	34	0	82	34	220

*(Homes through a mix of direct build by LA, voids, relets, turnkey, part V, leases, AHB and acquisitions.)*

### Homes delivered 2016 to 2021

In addition, over the period 2017 to 2021, the Council will have assisted over 1,661 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 2,752 families in the 6 year period to the end of 2021.

The prospects for 2022 and beyond are equally positive. At the current rate of progress it is expected that the Council will oversee the delivery of 612 new homes in the next two years at a number of locations throughout the County.

	<i>Relets</i>	<i>LCC Acquisitions</i>	<i>LCC Construct</i>	<i>VOIDS</i>	<i>AHB delivery</i>	<i>Leasing</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>2022</b>	60	20	104	0	92	20	296
<b>2023</b>	60	20	46	0	170	20	316

### LCC target for homes to be delivered 2022/2023

Members should also note that the Council has used its powers under Compulsory Purchase on 22 occasions to secure abandoned or derelict homes. This facet of the Councils housing activity is set to be expanded in 2022 so that many more derelict buildings can be examined and acquired for refurbishment using enhanced CPO procedure as appropriate.

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:

- Provision of more homes to accommodate smaller family units and single person applicants reflecting the fact that nearly 73% of those on our housing list are in that 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 sites capable of urban regeneration,
- Prepare a number of plans for consideration as serviced sites.

In the area of preventing homelessness, the Council continues to prioritise this matter and expenditure of €554,000 is provided for this purpose in 2022.

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 2022 Revenue Budget provides €3,665,000 for the maintenance and improvement of its approximately 2,350 housing units. This represents an increase of €1,102,500 over the past 5 years.

#### **CLIMATE ACTION, ENVIRONMENT AND FLOOD RELIEF**

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 was passed into law in the summer of this year.

It places Ireland on a legally binding path to net-Zero emissions no later than 2050, and to a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030. The Act provides the framework for Ireland to meet its international and EU climate commitments and to become a leader in addressing climate change.

It further bolsters many of the provisions in the Climate Action Plan 2019 and in so doing places a statutory obligation on each local authority to prepare a sectoral climate action plan. The 2022 Budget provides for the preparation of such a plan as well as the preparation of a renewable energy plan for the Midlands region.

The 2019 Climate Action Plan 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
- prepared a carbon footprint analysis of Portlaoise
- drawn up a decarbonizing zone for Portlaoise
- taken the lead role as Midland Energy Agency, and
- prepared local biodiversity plans.

With the ongoing benefit of support from the Urban Regeneration Development Fund (€2.71 million) the following actions have been delivered to date in Portlaoise;

- Provision of solar powered litter bins
- Replacement of 2,500 street lights with energy efficient LED lighting
- Commencement of work on the Triogue Blueway to assist school going children
- The provision of on street electric car charging points with a further 10 to be provided at the new car park on the former CBS lands in 2022
- The provision/improvement of xx km of cycle paths

A programme of work to be undertaken in the short term and for which a budget of €109,000 is provided includes;

- ❖ The replacement of the balance of existing stock of street lights with efficient LED lighting, at this point nearly 6,500 lights (70% of total stock) have been replaced in the County,
- ❖ The ongoing planning and implementation of flood relief works in Mountmellick, Portarlinton, Clonaslee and other locations around the county
- ❖ 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.
- ❖ In addition under the housing programme the Council has awarded contracts for the deep retrofitting of 157 Council owned houses. This activity has been supported under the Just Transition Fund and by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

River Basin District Management offices were put in place throughout the country in 2018 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 retention of €3,000 in the Budget in respect of the Cathaoirleach's Award for good environmental practice in the 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.



Despite the massive difficulties encountered by many business sectors over the past twenty months it is heartening to witness so much rebound effort in the Laois business community. There are grounds for anticipating a business bounce over the next couple of years in the domestic economy on the back of recent forecasts that GDP will grow by 5.5% in 2021, 7.1% in 2022 and 4.1% in 2023. *(Central Bank Q4 Statement)* By any measure this represents a period of sustained growth in Ireland and to that end Laois County Council will continue to position itself through its policy direction and actions to maximize investment opportunity in the County.

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 2022 budget and a sum of €1,490,000 is allocated to support enterprise, training and business innovation in Co Laois.

It is 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 the post Brexit business world and in equipping business to embrace on line opportunities in the pandemic.

The ongoing development and promotion of the J17 Enterprise Park provides a clear opportunity for Laois to set its own direction for increased employment and economic activity at one of the prime locations on the M7 inter urban motorway.

The new Glanbia EU Cheese manufacturing plant became operational in mid summer 2021, Alpha Drives Ltd is currently building its new building on site and it is expected that Aubren/Novaerus and Midland Steel Ltd will commence building in 2022. These four companies will have the potential to employ on aggregate 270 people in the period ahead and 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. The new access road and associated services for phase one development were completed during 2021.

When positioned against development on the IDA site on the Mountrath Road (Greenfield Global 2020), 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. Members should also note that work has commenced on the refurbishment of the CUBE building on Tower Hill, Portlaoise and will be open for business in early 2022. The marketing and promotion of Laois in collaboration with the Laois Chamber of Commerce, the IDA, EI, Laois Tourism and the business community will continue to be one of the Council's main goals in 2022.

Further work will commence in 2022 under the Just Transition Fund whereby Laois County Council acting on behalf of the four midland counties will resource and establish a programme for promoting the Midland network of Co Working Facilities and promote digital marketing for the region. In this regard it is planned to promote remote working in the County as a more sustainable form of work and that the quality of life and environmental gains will be highlighted.

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 is responsible for the 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 will therefore continue to play a significant and pivotal role in economic development locally and must maintain if not bolster its structures to respond to new demands on Local Government. The Council 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**

Following Government approval under the Urban Regeneration Development Fund for “The Low Carbon Town” and “The Cultural Quarter” in 2019 works have commenced in Portlaoise on many fronts. In 2020 the Council received financial support for smarter travel schemes in both Portarlington and Portlaoise in amounts of €544,000 and €375,000 respectively. Earlier in 2020 the Council was allocated €674, 437 in respect of Portlaoise destination Town project through Fáilte Ireland. The Council is now in a position to proceed with regeneration projects at the above locations and to engage with the local communities through the implementation phases.

Over the past number of 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, ORIS, Tidy Towns Grants, Community Enhancement Scheme, Tourism Grants, Better Energy Communities, Sports and Recreational Grants, Cemetery Grants etc to the order of €6 million. In the current year for example Laois County Council has benefited from funding in the amount of €383,375 for works in Rathdowney, Stradbally, Timahoe, Durrow, Vicarstown/Emo/Killeslin/Donaghmore/Camross. There is also grant aid for Laois Tourism & Slieve Bloom Mountain signage under the ORIS scheme.

In relation to the Rural Regeneration Development Fund members will be aware the Council was successful in its funding application for the historic core of Portarlington. It is expected that further progress on the refurbishment of the Market House will be made in 2022.

Provision has been made in the Revenue Budget for matched funding in respect of the above projects.

Mindful of the value of the RRDF fund the Council will again prepare an application in respect of the Old Courthouse in Borris-in-Ossory for the 2022 scheme.

The 2022 Budget makes provision to support on an ongoing basis this voluntary effort. In addition, the community grant aid scheme, so important to local community groups, tidy towns grants and community projects are to be funded in the amount of €216,000 in 2022.

### **TOURISM AND HERITAGE**

Last month Portlaoise was judged to be Ireland's cleanest Town. The success comes after many years of collaborative effort by the Portlaoise Tidy Towns Group, the Portlaoise Downtown Team and by Laois County Council. The accolade is a clear example and a pleasant reminder of what can be achieved when communities come together to pursue a common goal. The award will also underpin the ongoing collective countywide effort to bring out the best in the hospitality, tourism and heritage sectors and as such bodes well for prospects in 2022.

A sum of €798,300 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.

The Tourism Development Plan for Laois was launched in early 2018 and is due for review in 2022. 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. The Council will continue to provide significant support to the Laois Chamber of Commerce/Laois Tourism organization in the county. The 2022 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 is well advanced the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail (100km total length) and work is well advanced on the Barrow Blueway south of Vicarstown. On completion both will be top class amenities and will attract greater numbers of visitors to our county. The Slieve Bloom

Trail is being undertaken by Coillte with a view towards having most of the trail available to visitors by the middle of the 2022. Matched funding of €380,000 is provided in the capital budget for 2022 to 2023.

After two very disruptive years 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 2022 Budget provides support in the amount of €20,000 in respect of the national ploughing championship that hopefully can proceed in Co Laois next year.

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 €94,000 is provided in respect of Donaghmore Workhouse, the Fintan Lalor Homestead and heritage work on three of the County's Old Churches, the latter as a Just Transition Fund scheme..

#### CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2022 TO 2023

The elected members are obliged to consider an indicative three year capital programme. The revenue budget 2022 makes provision for repayment of portion of capital deficit balance incurred on a number of capital projects over the past number of years. The Capital Programme will be presented at the November monthly meeting of Laois County Council.

#### **Development Contributions**

At this point in 2021 just over €1,068,000 in development charges has been collected. The scheme was revised and approved by the Members in late 2017 and further extended in October 2019 so that added stimulus could be provided to the private housing construction sector. The workings of the scheme have been 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 was renewed following the local elections of 2019. I wish to thank the members of the Committee 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 have addressed policy issues and challenges facing the County 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 respectively are also embarking on a new programme of work and policy development for this Council in the year ahead.

### **Municipal District Committees**

The Council's three District Committees of Borris in Ossory/Mountmellick, Portlaoise and Graiguecullen/Portarlinton under the current Chairmanships of Councillors Ollie Clooney, Mary Sweeney, and Pdraig Fleming 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 2021.

### **Conclusion**

I wish to thank all the members of the Council, Cathaoirleach Councillor Conor Bergin and his predecessor Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald for their continuing work in advancing the development and interests of the County.

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 2021 and to thank them for their outstanding public service to the people of Laois. I wish to reserve a special word of tribute to Councillors Tom Mulhall and Mary Sweeney both of whom retired as Elected Members in the course of the year. They have served their communities very well and deserve good fortune in their retirements.

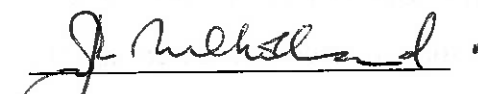
In this exceptional couple of years for the whole country and our local community I wish to convey my compliments to the many staff of this Council who have provided top class public service during the pandemic. I especially wish to mention all those in our community who have given voluntary service in difficult times and to congratulate our own staff who continue to provide assistance and support to the more vulnerable in our community.

I wish to record my particular appreciation to Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance, Donal Brennan, Simon Walton, Angela McEvoy, Directors of Services for their work in preparing the 2022 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 in a year that has presented so many challenges in a personal and workplace context.

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 2022.

Mise le Meas,



*John Mulholland*  
John Mulholland  
Chief Executive

4<sup>th</sup> November 2021

## SERVICE DIVISION – HOUSING, REGENERATION & PLANNING

### Introduction

This Directorate's primary functions are:

- Guiding the sustainable development of our county
- Regenerating underutilized or derelict areas of the county
- Providing housing for those who cannot do so from their own resources

### Housing

Social Housing delivery is still a challenge for this local authority despite the significant progress to date and the resources being applied to its provision. The graph in figure 1 below demonstrates the increasing delivery of social housing over the past 5 years.

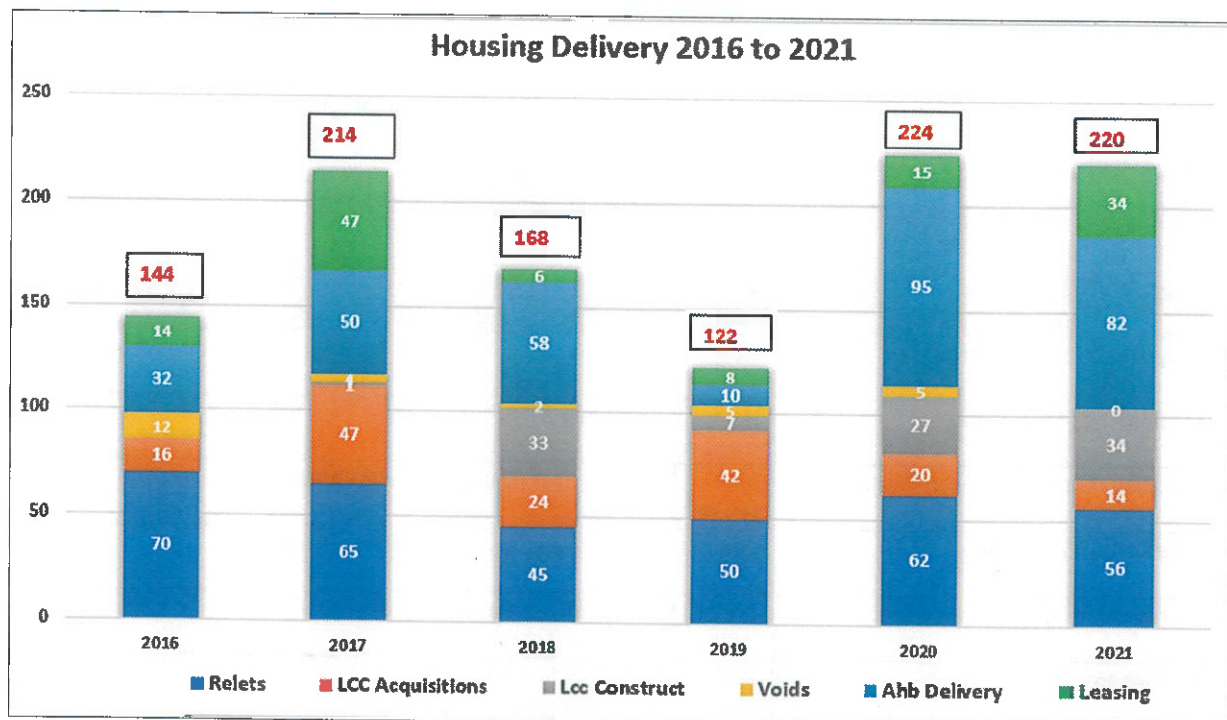


Figure 1: Housing Delivery Outputs 2016-2021

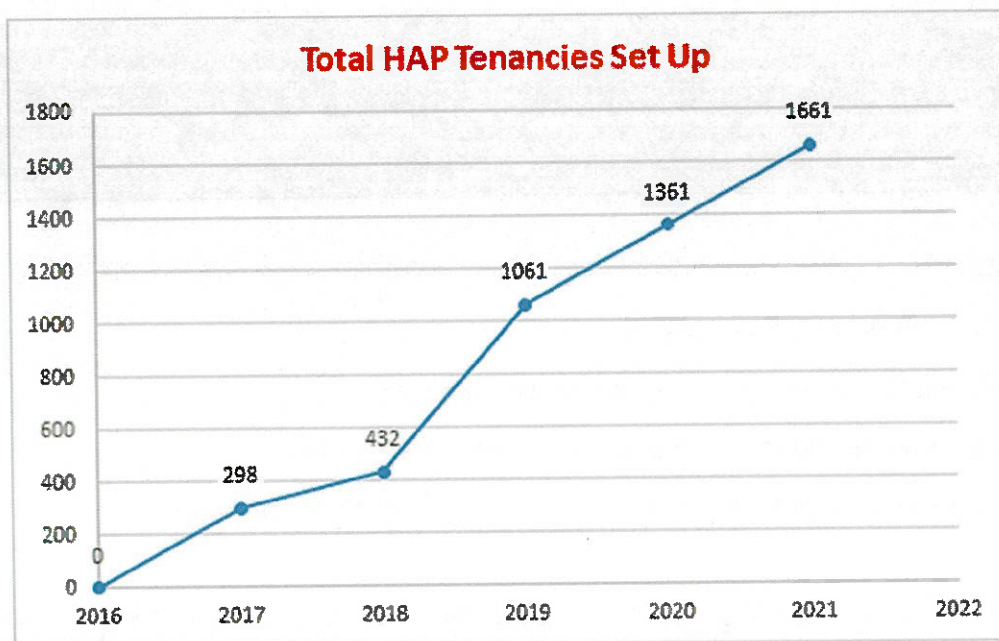


Figure 2: Housing Assistance Payment Tenancies Setup in Co. Laois

Figure 2 above demonstrates the progress in the creation of tenancies under the Housing Assistance Payment programme.

Table 1 below gives a summary of the social and voluntary housing projects that have either been completed this year or are currently at construction stage.

Scheme	Units	Progress
Completed		
Ballymorris, Portarlinton	22	Completed
Shannon St., Mountrath	6	Completed
The Glen, Kilnacourt, Portarlinton	36	Cooperative Housing Ireland- Delivered
Lake Drive, Kilminchy	10	Cooperative Housing Ireland – Delivered
Doirinn Alainn, Ballylinan	12	North & East Housing - delivered
Bellingham, Portlaoise	30	Cluid - Delivered
Under Construction		
Moore Street, Rathdowney	6	Direct Build , under construction



Gleann na Glaise, Ballyroan	10	Direct Build , under construction
Pattison Estate, Mountmellick	10	Direct Build , under construction
Sean Doire, Durrow	22	Direct Build , under construction
Coolore, Ballybrittas	1	Direct Build , under construction
Borris In Ossory	5	Turnkey – Contractor on site
Bruach Na Habhainn	4	Turnkey – Contractor on site
Church St. Stradbally	31	Turnkey – Contractor on site
The Orchard, Ballylynan	5	Turnkey – Contractor on site
Holdbrook, Portlaoise	20	Cluid – Phase 1 (10 units) delivered
Wilton Lawns	2	Respond Housing Association. Contractor on site
Clonrooske Abbey	32	Cluid – contractor on site
The Maltings & Roselawn	55	Cluid – contractor on site (3 phases)
Spa Street, Droughill, Portarlinton	26	Oaklee Housing – Contractor on site
Harpurs Lane, Portlaoise	44	Respond – Contractor on site
Ballymorris Green, Portarlinton	30	Cluid – contractor on site

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

In addition to the above, there is a strong pipeline of projects currently going through the design, planning and procurement stages.

The management and maintenance of existing housing units in accordance with the 2017 and 2019 regulations is a core objective of this Council. To date in 2021 (up to 31/10/21), 2,958 repair requests have been requested of the Council (Figure 3) and 2,520 have been completed.

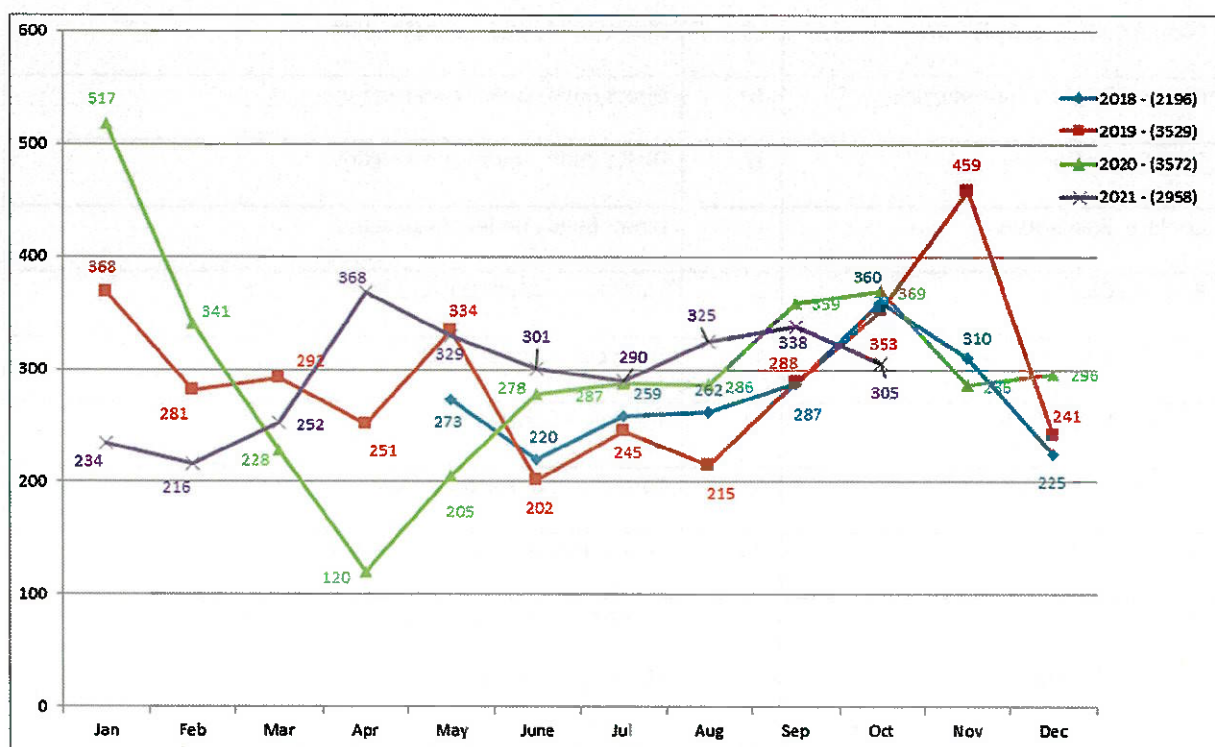


Figure 3: Repair requests to Laois County Council housing units.

The proposed budget includes an allocation towards a planned maintenance programme. This provides the seed funding to enable the Council progress to the first stage of surveying and assessment. As an alternative to changing heating systems as part of planned maintenance it was decided to add planned maintenance as an extra to the retrofitting programme for 31 units in O'Moore Place for 2021/2022.

Separately under Just Transition, inspections were carried out on 157 houses as part of the energy retrofit programme. Construction has commenced on Lot 1(62 units) and Lot 2(44 units). It is hoped works will start on Lot 3(51 units) in Q4 2021.

In other areas of housing, 31 Rebuilding Ireland Home Loans and over 290 housing grants have been approved. The Council will progress in Q1 of 2022 grants for local authority tenants that have not been progressed in 2021.

The Housing Assessment staff continue to access housing applications in accordance with the 2011 Regulations in an efficient and effective manner. There are currently 1,876 approved applicants on the Council's housing list but this includes 993 accommodated through the Housing Assistance Programme (HAP)

The number of homeless presentations to date in 2021 is 192. Currently, there are 18 households in emergency accommodation, that is, 15 single persons, 1 couple and two-family units with children.

The numbers presenting with Notices of Termination (NTQ's) has increased with the removal of Covid-19 restrictions. Laois County Council has spent €221,000 on emergency accommodation to date in 2021. The HAP Placement Finder has intervened in 54 cases to prevent homelessness. This will continue to be area of pressure in 2022.

## **Regeneration**

This continues to be a critical function for the Directorate going into 2022 with the reinforced objectives through "Housing for all" to provide Housing and deal with dereliction and vacancy in our towns and villages to ensure the continuing viability and vitality of our town centres. It is the objective of this service to progress the following projects in particular

- The County Hotel, Main Street Portlaoise;
- Iona, Abbeyleix Road;
- Hepburn Court and Clonrooske;
- Doran's Field and
- Tyrells Landbank on Stradbally Road

also progress through the formal planning stage in 2022.

The Council will in 2022 acquire further sites with a view to their regeneration.

Furthermore, under the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015, the implementation of the Vacant Site levy will continue, and work will commence on the preparation of the data to implement the Development Land Tax introduced in 2022.

The Council has been active in addressing the effects of vacant and underutilised/derelict houses/sites through its derelict site and compulsory acquisition powers. This co-ordinated action across the Directorate will be strengthened in 2022.

### Planning

It is anticipated that the process of review and preparation of the County Development Plan 2021-2027 for County Laois will be adopted by the Council in December 2021. Implications in relation amendments not aligning with both national and regional planning policy as indicated by the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) must be taken into account with the possibility of having to respond to a Ministerial Direction for 2022 as a result.

It is proposed to prepare a Renewable Energy Strategy for the Midlands Region in 2022 to identify the needs of the county in terms of Climate Action measures.

The Planning department is also leading the development of the “Tyrrells Land” Portlaoise urban masterplan.

It is expected that 5 estates will have been taken in charge by the end of 2021 and it is anticipated that the Council will bring forward further estates in 2022 for taking in charge.

While the overall number of planning applications has increased markedly in 2021, Laois County Council is well placed to move to a digital service – E-planning - in 2022 in line with the Council’s recently adopted Digital Strategy.

The Heritage service had a successful year in 2021. This will conclude with the imminent adoption of the New Heritage Plan for the period 2020-2025. Planned projects for 2022 include the Heritage Awareness programme (including Heritage Week and Science week events), phase II of a book on the Rock of Dunamase and developing the new Laois Heritage Plan. The proposed budget provides for the following:

- Further works with Communities with respect to local graveyards;
- Works on the Borris-in Ossory Courthouse;
- Works on the Fintan Lalor Homestead;
- Just Transition project to address built and natural heritage in graveyards in partnership with Offaly County Council;
- National Biodiversity Action Plan initiatives;
- Works on Donaghmore Workhouse

The Broadband office has included a number of actions for implementation of the Local Digital Strategy 2020-2024 including the continued roll out of Broadband Connection Points in various locations throughout the county and the continued development of Free Public Wifi Zones in Urban areas in conjunction with the European WIFI4EU programme. This programme is currently being rolled out in 4 locations in the County commencing with Portarlinton. Other actions include the aforementioned digital planning service, public awareness, skills development, etc also will be pursued.

## SERVICE DIVISION – ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM SUPPORT

### ECONOMIC AND ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT IN LAOIS

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

The Council's Business Support Unit (BSU) and the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) 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, small and medium enterprises 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 2022 budget and a sum of €1,490,000 is allocated to support enterprise, training, mentoring, business continuity and innovation in the county.

The ongoing development and promotion of the J17 Enterprise Park provides a clear opportunity for Laois to set its own direction for increased employment and economic activity at one of the prime locations on the M7 inter urban motorway.

The new Glanbia EU Cheese manufacturing plant is in operation and the new road and services infrastructure is in place. Alpha Drives Ltd has commenced constructing its new facility whilst Aubren Ltd and Midland Steel are expected to commence their developments in 2022. Discussions are ongoing with a number of companies and it is anticipated that there will be further development activity on the site in 2022 bringing more investment and employment to the area.

Steady progress is being made in the county in attracting talent and economic activity. The marketing and promotion of Laois in collaboration with the Laois Chamber of Commerce, the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and the business community will continue to be one of the Council's main goals in 2022. In this regard, we will continue to promote remote working in the County as a more sustainable form of work and that the quality of life and environmental gains will be highlighted.

The Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) is responsible for the delivery of the LEADER programme in the County in partnership with the Laois Partnership Company and Laois County Council as a financial partner. In excess of €1.4m has been paid in grants to various groups and organisations to date in 2021.

The committee is statutorily responsible for the planning and co-ordination of local and community development programmes, in accordance with the 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. During 2020 and 2021, it administered the Restart Grants and Small Business Assistance Schemes on behalf of the government. These schemes were of significant help to businesses impacted by COVID-19. The Council has structured itself to respond to new demands on Local Government and must work in partnership with IDA and Enterprise Ireland to identify opportunities as they arise to stimulate economic development and create the environment for job creation.

#### TOURISM AND HERITAGE

The Tourism Development Plan for Laois (2018-2023) will enable Laois to harness the potential of its built and natural heritage to become an all year-round tourism destination. It will attract

visitors through quality authentic Irish heritage and outdoor activity experiences. 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. The Council will continue to provide significant support to the Laois Chamber of Commerce and Laois Tourism. The 2022 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 continues on the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail (100km total length) and on the Barrow Blueway. On completion both will be blue ribbon amenities and will attract significant numbers of visitors to our county and region. The Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail is being undertaken by Coillte and 43km of trail are already open to the public in Laois and Offaly. Match funding of €380,000 was provided in the capital budget (2021 to 2023)

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. In acknowledging the value of built heritage to the tourism industry and local communities a sum of €94,000 is provided in respect of Donaghmore Workhouse, the Fintan Lalor Homestead, heritage work on the County's Churches and Cemeteries as well as the preparation of a Biodiversity Plan.



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

### COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

As a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic Laois County Council continued to make available the Community Call Helpline and support the Community Response Forum, up to end of October, when these supports were stood down nationally. It is appropriate to acknowledge the Council's partner bodies, sporting organisations and voluntary groups who contributed so much to the community response over the last 20 months, to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 restrictions. The Laois Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) manage or provide oversight to the distribution of:

- €136,524 to 68 groups under the Community Enhancement Programme (CEP)
- €23,793.59 under the Dormant Accounts Social Enterprise Capital Grant Scheme.
- the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme with a budget of €604,226.
- The LEADER 2014-2020 Programme, operating through the auspices of the Laois Local Action Group (LAG), concluded on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 having approved 134 projects to the value of €5,557,492.21.
- The Transitional LEADER programme commenced on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 with a project budget allocation of €1,092,976. To date, under the Transitional LEADER programme, 12 projects have been approved.
- the newly formed European Union Recovery Instrument Fund (EURI) with a project allocation of €485,767, through Laois LAG

#### PPN

The Council continued its positive and collaborative working relationship with Laois PPN. During 2021, with a large and diverse membership base of 630 Member Groups across the County,

## Programmes

The Community Section manage a range of programmes including

- Age Friendly programme
- Youth Programme (in association with youth work Ireland)
- Town and Village Renewal Scheme
- Pride of Place
- Community Grants
- Community Awards (in association with Laois PPN)
- Laois Connects
- Healthy Ireland Programme and Keep Well Programmes
- Burial Grounds
- Climate Action
- Energy Improvement

## ARTS

Despite the challenges of Covid 19, strong collaboration continued between the Arts office and Music Generation Laois and Laois School of Music throughout 2021. *Laois Youth Theatre* continued their weekly workshops on-line concluding with a performance for Cruinniu na nÓg on 12<sup>th</sup> June. It is proposed to start a new Youth Theatre group in Portarlinton.

*Laois Culture Night* in September 2021 was a huge success with a packed programme of 15 events online and offline taking place on Friday 17<sup>th</sup> September all around Laois.

Laois was one of 21 counties chosen for the *Poetry Town* programme. Mountmellick was the town selected and Arthur Broomfield was appointed as Poet Laureate.

### Local Live Public Performance Scheme

A unique approach was adopted to the Local Live Public Performance Scheme (LLPPS) in Co Laois by commissioning a series of professionally filmed artistic performances at key tourism locations. This not only assisted the participating artists but also showcases the beauty and potential the

county has for film and tourism purposes. A Gala screening is planned to take place in November at the Dunamaise Theatre, Portlaoise.

## RECREATION, SPORT AND PLAY

In June 2021 Laois County Council agreed a new management structure for *Laois Leisure*, to operate both Portlaoise and Portarlington Leisure Centres, and with a newly restructured board representative of both localities. Portarlington Leisure Centre reopened in June 2021 and continues to deliver an excellent service despite COVID-19 restrictions. Following on from the refurbishment works in Portlaoise Leisure Centre, pool refurbishment works in Portarlington will commence in 2022.

Laois County Council also provided on-going advice and financial support to Ballinakill Community Development Association to successfully operate the outdoor swimming pool during the summer of 2021.

Twenty play facilities continue to be managed, maintained and upgraded by Laois County Council. Laois County Council is supporting the development of a new playground in Ballinakill, which is currently under construction and will be completed by the end of 2021. Part VIII Planning approval has been granted for the development of a community playground and multi-use games area (MUGA) in Borris in Ossory, and Laois County Council are actively assisting this community with various funding applications. CLÁR funding of €50,000 has been awarded to Ballyfin Development Association to develop a community playground, also assisted by Laois County Council.

Both Portlaoise and Portarlington public parks retained their Green Flag Awards in August 2021.

Laois County Council delivered six events outdoors to celebrate National Play Day and National Recreation Week in July 2021. During National Bike Week in September, over five hundred people took part in cycling events organised by Laois County Council and our community partners and focus was placed on encouraging use of the newly installed Barrow Blueway and cycle paths.

## CLIMATE

The Carbon Footprint Study of Portlaoise town was completed in 2021. Portlaoise SEC 2040 and Portarlington SEC are preparing to tender for Energy Master Plans which will be bridge funded by LCC. The Climate Action Section have also been working extensively with key stakeholders in the Education Sector offering workshops and a range of training supports in order to build knowledge and capacity to leverage public engagement in Portlaoise Low Carbon Town Project.

## HUMAN RESOURCES

The level of recruitment activity during the year was significantly affected by Covid-19 although vacancies continued to arise from retirements, resignations and some centrally funded positions.

34 recruitment competitions have been held year to date in 2021. This resulted in a total of 852 applications received, with 581 candidates to date being called to interview (including shortlisting interviews). Further recruitment will continue to year end as required.

A total of 44 staff appointments have been made to date in 2021.

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The IT section continued to invest in the modernisation and digitisation of services for the public, members and staff.

In relation to Cyber Security the year was dominated by the attack on the HSE and Laois County Council responded to review and security harden systems given the increased threat level. The prevalence of remote working due to COVID 19 required a focus on the updating of laptops and a remote patch management system was put in place to ensure all remote devices were continually patched with the latest security updates.

Our Firewall and Anti-virus infrastructure were reviewed and configured based on best practice standards. An on-line training portal was procured to keep staff educated on Cyber threats and how each member of staff plays their part in keeping the data of the citizens of Laois secure.

The digitisation of services continued with an online system deployed for the Local Enterprise Office to assist in supporting those in the business community. Further investment was made in the consultation portal to accept submissions from the public on Council Development proposals and Council strategies.

Video conferencing has become the cornerstone of operations at present and the move to Office 365 and Microsoft Teams for all staff and Councillors has allowed the Council to conduct its business efficiently throughout the COVID 19 crisis. This investment will continue with our imminent move to Microsoft Teams Telephony to support seamless communications whether in the office or working remotely.

#### LIBRARY SERVICES

The Library service continues to play a pivotal role for all communities in Co. Laois. Public Libraries continued to offer an efficient frontline service for all members providing them with access to books, media, online services and internet/wifi/printing facilities. Public Libraries in Laois have been open throughout the county since the 8th of May 2021 and offering full lending services by booking appointment and walk-in. We are still offering book deliveries to the housebound and cocooners and a “call and collect” service which means customers can pre-order any books or library resources in advance and call to the library and collect them. During Covid-19 Library Services have adapted and continue to operate with our online Library services supported by staff on a remote basis. The library continues to provide access and support the public to access all of our online material. This includes -Ebooks which continue to be very well used- issuing in excess of 31,089 online items for the period January -September 2021 .

Library staff have moved all of events and activities to an online programme - producing and facilitating live videos and content featuring story time and crafts for younger users, literature and local history talks. Regular events were hosted online via zoom and include music, health, history and parenting talks. The Library continues to promote literacy, wellbeing, culture and positive mental health throughout all of our social media posting sharing links to HSE, Creative Ireland, Healthy Ireland , Culture, Heritage and Biodiversity and other local pages.

Libraries are continuing with the introduction of sensory friendly library services.

This includes a sensory room and sensory garden space in Mountmellick library, sensory toys collections in Portarlington, and Mountmellick libraries which can be borrowed. New interactive/magic tables have been purchased for libraries in Abbeyleix, Mountmellick and Portarlington which can be used by children/adults with additional sensory needs.

### Capital Development

- Portlaoise Library

Works continued and resumed on the new library during 2021 as guided by public health restrictions on Main Street Portlaoise with completion of foundations works , piling , ground floor , first works blockwork and steel works .

- Rathdowney Library roof repair and replacement

Works commenced in September to repair and upgrade the roof in Rathdowney Library .

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

**Roads/Transportation**

Local expenditure funds to be allocated to Roads and Transportation for 2022 are in line with 2021 levels.

It is of note that **car parking income** continues to return to pre-pandemic levels and income levels (€555,000) set out in the 2022 Revenue Budget reflect stronger income from parking in 2022 as compared to 2021.

The **Roadworks Programme 2022** will be presented to Elected Members in March 2022 following notification of Department of Transport and Transport Infrastructure Ireland grants. This budget reflects similar levels of funding to those provided in 2021.

**Public lighting** provision is similar to recent years covering maintenance and energy supply costs to an expanding network of public lights. Some additional funding is required to allow for increased energy supply costs. Public lighting accounts for 53% of Laois County Council's energy consumption. Considered in isolation, the public lighting retrofit programme (commenced in 2019) has yielded energy savings of 750,500 Kilo Watt Hours per annum, the equivalent of €150,000 in monetary terms per annum. However, in roughly the same period, an additional 750 public lights have been added to the Council's inventory of public lights and a number of energy price increases have also been introduced.

In 2020 Elected Members approved a multi annual approach to **River Drainage Maintenance** and the first two years of works have been undertaken. In the first instance the works are focussed on the 7 designated Drainage Districts in County Laois, for which Laois County Council has direct responsibility. Various applications for consents are under consideration by An Bord Pleanala and other consent applications are under preparation with a view to the 2022 Programme of Works.

The 2022 Budget provides €358,000 to this area, commensurate with local provision in 2021. Unspent allocations from previous years are capitalised and carried forward as the new Multi Annual approach gathers momentum.

In keeping with enhanced NTA supports for the development of a Smarter Travel focussed Transportation Programme this Budget includes provision for three additional staff members, fully funded by NTA, to resource and expedite NTA funded schemes. Recruitment has commenced and this new resource will be in place in Q1 2022.

This budget provides an additional €40,000 for public realm maintenance/street cleaning noting that, as the public realm is broadened and enhanced, additional litter infrastructure, landscaping etc. provided, there is a complimentary requirement to provide measures to adequately maintain and service the items provided.

## ENVIRONMENT

### RECOVERY & RECYCLING FACILITIES OPERATIONS

This budget provides for the ongoing operation of both the Waste Transfer Station at Kyletelesha and Civic Amenity Sites (Kyletelesha and Portarlinton). Additionally, the C&D waste disposal facility is performing very well and represents an additional, significant source of income for Laois County Council.

This budget continues to fund 42 Bring Bank facilities throughout County Laois. In May 2021, Laois County Council entered a regional contract with Longford, Offaly and Westmeath County Councils for the collection and treatment of glass and cans at the facility.

### LITTER MANAGEMENT

Priority is given to litter management and to the clean-up of illegal dumping locations.

Each year community groups are supported through grants towards projects which promote anti-litter awareness and environmental education initiatives. The Council continues to work with communities in organising the clean-up campaigns.



The section received €95,260 from the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications towards anti-dumping initiatives. The anti-dumping initiatives included the clean-up of certain bogs, an amnesty for the collection of bulky goods and investment in smart technology (drones) for the investigation of illegal dumping activities.

#### WASTE REGULATIONS, MONITORING AND ENFORCEMENT

The Enforcement Unit monitors compliance with the Waste Regulations, through the processing of waste permit applications and certificates of registration, conducting inspections, monitoring/control of waste movements and enforcing legislation under producer responsibility obligations (Packaging Waste Regulations).

In 2021 the enforcement officers investigated various illegal dumping incidents, resulting in the removal of over 250 tonnes of waste across County Laois. The 2022 Budget enables a similar level of service in 2022, as required.

#### WATER QUALITY, AIR AND NOISE POLLUTION

The River Basin Management Plan 2018-2021 requires local authorities to monitor water quality in our rivers and lakes. In collaboration with the Local Authorities Waters Programme (LAWPRO) a number of river catchments are identified as Priority Areas for Action where measures and actions will be deployed to improve the water quality. This Budget provides for the resources to support the measures required for the Priority Areas for Action and further provides for assessment and monitoring of Water Pollution Act(s) Discharge Licences, assessment of nutrient management plans, domestic wastewater treatment systems and farm inspections, all in support of enhanced water quality.

## WATER SERVICES

Laois County Council provides public water and wastewater services under a Service Level Agreement with Irish Water, who are the Water Services Authority. Annual costs incurred by Laois County Council are recouped by the Council from Irish Water and the 2022 Budget reflects such provision.

The Budget also provides €40,000 towards the ongoing costs of maintaining some 'stranded' Water Services assets that Laois County Council is seeking to transfer to Irish Water.

Separately, Laois County Council is the statutory authority overseeing Water Services Group Schemes, Small Private Supplies and Domestic Wastewater Treatment Systems (Septic Tanks). Funding, in addition to technical and administrative supports, is provided annually by Laois County Council to support the Rural Water Programme. Budget 2022 retains funding levels appropriate to ongoing support for the Rural Water Programme.

## FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

Fire & Emergency Services represents a very substantial service area for Laois County Council. The 2022 Budget outlines a net spend on day to day operations in the sum of €4.3 million.

The service is provided across 8 Fire Stations serving a growing population. In line with increasing call outs this Budget provides €2.25 for mobilisation costs incurred in response to Fire & Emergency Events, the same as 2021. A sum of €892,000 is provided for the operation of the various stations (maintenance of facilities, utilities, payments to adjoining Fire Authorities for services provided, Communications (Tetra) Systems payments etc.)

Notwithstanding interim interruptions related to Covid-19, Fire-Fighter training is continuously being enhanced in line with more stringent fire-fighter safety standards. A sum of €325,000 is provided for training in 2022.

In its role as a Principal Responder to Major Emergency Events this budget allocates €108,000 for Major Emergency Management in 2022.

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, evidenced by the significant support provided since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Strategically, taking account of 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 to deliver an enhanced service to the people of County Laois.

