

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL
COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE



BUISÉID 2023

BUDGET 2023

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL - 2023 BUDGET

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

Dear Councillor,

Rarely has a set of external factors had such an impact on the draughting of the Revenue Budget at Local Authority level. Since its foundation in 1899 Laois County Council has faced and overcome many difficult issues, including rampant inflation and unemployment in the 1970's and 80's, the financial crash of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020/21, but none have been comparable to the current set of circumstances precipitated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The impact of the invasion in Ukraine is well documented elsewhere and for Laois County Council this means providing for much increased energy costs, higher material costs, increased wages and inflation all of which will hit the bottom line on the revenue budget in an adverse way. The impacts on local economic and social wellbeing have already been felt and it remains to be seen how this will further pan out in the year ahead. Therefore, the capacity of the Council to generate much needed additional income from traditional sources of revenue, both locally and from the central exchequer is extremely limited.

The 2023 Draft Revenue Budget provides for an expenditure of €95,809,000.

This is to be funded as follows:

Local Property Tax Allocation	€9,033,703 (9.43%)
Government supplementary support for energy	€1,142,562 (1.19%)
Government Rates	€14,578,963 (15.22%)
Government Grants	€44,167,949 (46.1%)
Goods & Services	€26,885,823 (28.06%)

BUDGET CONTEXT 2023

The context of the 2023 Budget is very much set against the live background of a rapid transition from the Covid-19 pandemic to major conflict in Eastern Europe and its consequences in this country. Laois County Council, through its procurement framework, has been notified of very large

increases in energy costs, road making materials and construction products. Specifically, the following categories of price escalation must be provided for in the 2023 budgetary arithmetic:

Energy and electricity charges : 266%

Road making materials : 30%

Diesel, petrol, gas : 35% to 60% *since Jan 2022.*

Construction price index : 14% *(ref SCS)*

It is also noted that inflation generally is running at 9.5% and that for 2023 inflation is forecast at 8%. Taken together these increases will give rise to roughly €3million additional costs in the year ahead just to stand still.

In recent weeks this Council has been advised through its parent Department that much needed financial support will be made available in extra provision for energy costs and in respect of the national pay agreement. Were it not for the ongoing support of central Government the budgetary prospects for 2023 would be extremely bleak and it is clear that Laois County Council would have had to reduce services in a drastic way.

In the first quarter of 2022 it was very much the case that Laois County Council was still working within the physical, social and financial parameters of the Covid-19 pandemic. Members will recall that most restrictions were removed towards the end of February this year and that since that time normal functioning of the Council and external business has returned.

It is also worth recalling at this point that Laois County Council processed payments and supports to local business by way of the Rates Waiver Scheme throughout 2020 ,2021 and early 2022. The value to local business was €5.88 million in 2020, €3.78 million in 2021 and €396k in Q1 this year. Laois County Council administered both the business Restart Grant Scheme and the Restart Plus Grant scheme over the same period during which €2.51 million and €5.18 million respectively was provided in grant assistance to 1,611 business entities. In addition, this Council disbursed €335k in respect of the Small Business Assistance Scheme for Covid-19 in 2021.

The support and responsiveness of Government at that difficult time is acknowledged as is the support from the elected members of Laois County Council in getting the message to small and medium sized business that needed assistance over the period in question.

Notwithstanding the picture painted by the preceding paragraphs it remains the case that a balanced budget must be presented for the consideration of the Elected Members. It very much remains the case for prudential financial management reasons that there is no deviation from this practice. On the assumption that Government will assist local authorities in energy and public sector pay costs for the year ahead it has been possible to present a balanced Revenue Budget for 2023 and members should note there has been a comprehensive 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 2023 Budget adopts the same approach and remains focussed on that effort but is also very much a survival and consolidation statement given the unprecedented and unpredictable environment in which it has been prepared.

At a summary level the 2023 Revenue Budget aims to:-

- (i) Provide assistance and support to those in need of homes and to those most at risk of homelessness; it also for the first time includes small provision in respect of a Council contribution to affordable housing,
- (ii) Continue to stimulate economic and business recovery through local development and investment infrastructure and business supports generally;
- (iii) Enhance the reputation of County Laois as an events and business centre of scale
- (iv) Promote a clean and pristine environment conducive to a good standard of public health and wellbeing and to strive towards high quality public spaces in our Towns and Villages and parks

- (v) Make provision for the many challenges to be addressed under the Climate Action Plan 2021 including energy efficiency and retrofitting of homes and public buildings
- (vi) Assist as partners in the national effort to provide emergency accommodation for refugees.

THE REVENUE BUDGET PROCESS

The attached Budget for the financial year 2023 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 09/2022, dated 11/08/2022 determined the period November 1st to November 30th as the prescribed period for County Councils to hold their 2023 Statutory Budget Meetings.

Laois County Council's statutory budget meeting is scheduled to take place on Monday, 7th November 2022 at 11.00am. The process of considering and adopting the Budget must be concluded before November 22nd 2022.

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. (*Meeting of 25th October 2022 refers.*)
- The consideration by the elected members of the impact of a variation of the Local Property Tax rate. (*Meeting of 26th September refers.*)
- 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. The estimated income from such sources is based on less than certain assumptions notwithstanding that due diligence has been integral to the preparation of the Budget figures. 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.

RESERVED FUNCTIONS OF ELECTED MEMBERS

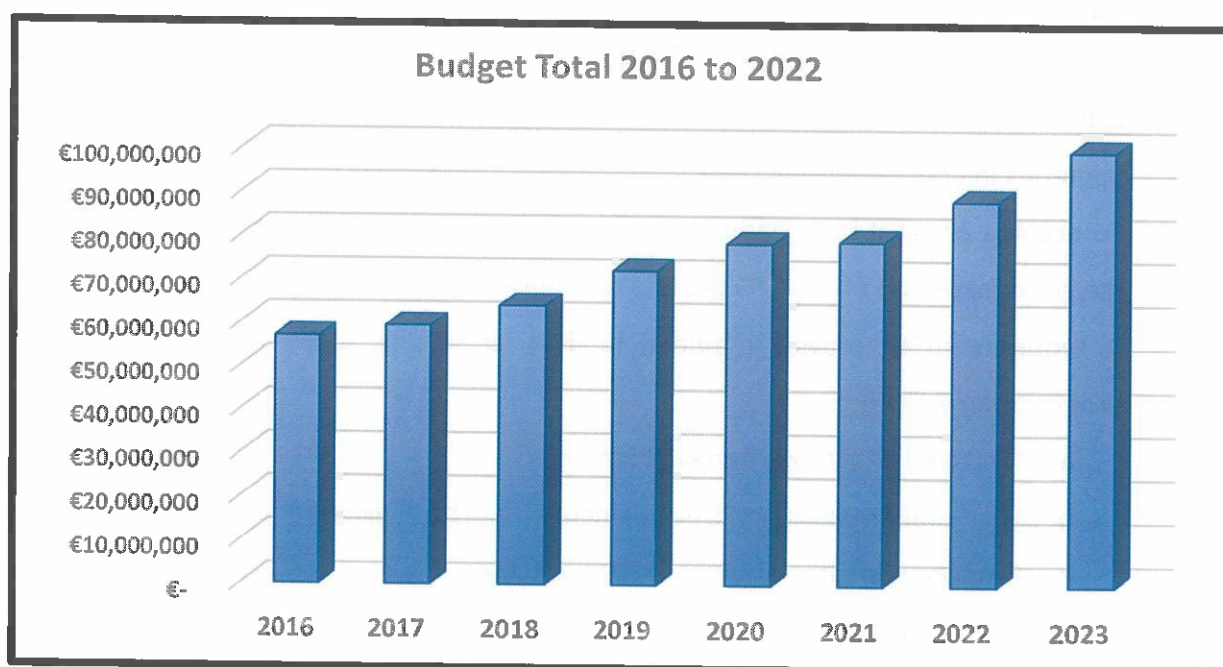
The members have a number of reserved functions in relation to the budgetary process as follows:

- (i) They have the power to vary the Local Property Tax Rate (LPT) by a factor of plus or minus 15%. At the September 26th Monthly Meeting of the Council the Elected Members made a decision not to change the LPT as it applied for the past number of years, i.e, that it remain 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 2023 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 2023 and the Revenue Budget for members' consideration now stands at €95.809 million, an increase of €7.462 million or 8.4% over 2022 and €39 million over the 2016 Budget.

REVENUE BUDGET 2016-2023



Laois County Council continues to exercise prudent budgetary oversight and sound financial management over all aspects of its spending. It is anticipated that there will be no credit or debit balance going into 2023, i.e. expenditure will match income for 2022.

The main factors that shape the drafting of the 2023 budget have been outlined in the introduction to this report, other factors are listed below.

On the income side:

1. An assumption of little growth in business and retail resulting in no additional yield from commercial rates
2. Retaining an increased income from the Local Property Tax in the amount of €474,826
3. An increase of €497,000 from rents on 2,300 Council owned houses,
4. An assumption that Laois County Council will benefit from State Grants for road upkeep and roads improvements in line with previous years.
5. An expectation of movement in vacancy levels in certain retail and business sectors

On the expenditure side

1. To continue to progress deep retrofitting work in 61 Council owned houses in 2023 and to continue with a planned maintenance programme to address heating system and other upgrades in Council housing stock.
2. To provide physical improvements in the County's main towns and villages including a more extensive use of the CPO process to acquire derelict buildings.
3. A requirement to provide matched funding to support a number of projects and programmes including:-
 - a. the Town and Village Renewal Schemes
 - b. The Rural Regeneration Development and Urban Regeneration Fund projects
 - c. Outdoor recreational improvement schemes
 - d. CLAR programmes
4. The requirement to meet targets and develop actions to comply with Public Sector obligations in the Climate Action Plan 2021.
5. The requirement to provide support to business and tourism in the county.

The Annual Budget for 2023 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 €95.809 million representing an increase of 8.4% in comparison with 2022.

The following areas of additional expenditure are of particular note:

- **€137,000** additional expenditure over 2022 on the maintenance of Council housing units and an additional sum of **€46,000** is included for increased tenant engagement activity
- An additional sum of **€190,000** for the provision of carbon monoxide alarms and fire blankets in Council houses
- **€185,000** additional expenditure is included for relets of Council houses
- **€160,000** additional expenditure is provided for retro fitting and energy efficiency works on Council houses
- Inclusion of **€45,000** as a contribution of LCC towards the affordable homes subsidy
- The budget includes a new provision **€134,000** towards the role by Laois County Council in assisting with the Ukrainian Refugee crisis;
- Provision of **€360,000** for footpath improvements at municipal level;
- An additional sum of **€87,000** towards the maintenance of burial grounds
- Provision of an additional **€89,000** towards the preparation of a Laois Climate Action Plan,
- Additional funding of **€40,000** towards conservation grants and heritage projects on churches , graveyards and heritage buildings,
- A sum of **€21,500** in respect of preparations for the national ploughing championship,
- Additional funding of **€94,100** in respect of the parks, playgrounds and open spaces;
- A provision of an additional **€116,000** towards drainage works throughout the County;
- Provision of an additional sum of **€7,000** for community projects to be decided at Municipal District level;
- An additional **€93,000** for cyber security and ICT improvements;
- 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 €9,033,703 for Laois County Council in 2023, slightly less than 2022 and despite more homes being liable for the tax.

Members at municipal level have decided the detail of General Municipal Allocation apportionment in the 2023 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 €14,578,963 for 2023. This is approximately €84k less than in 2022 and reflects the Councils assessment of the real challenges to business over the next twelve months. Rates income 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 a period spanning 2020, 2021 and 2022 Laois County Council provided much support to local business primarily through the rates waiver and business restart grant schemes. The total value of such support exceeded €18.8 million. It is acknowledged that trading conditions and the general economic environment will continue to be very challenging for many small businesses in the period ahead. It is also noted that Laois County Council through the Local Enterprise Office will have a key role in administering the recently announced Ukraine Enterprise Crisis Scheme valued at €200 million nationally. In that regard our various business departments (Finance, LEO and BSU) will endeavour to work through and provide support to SMEs as necessary and assist applicants in developing Business Sustainment Plans.

No.	Rate Band	Amount
323	Less €1,000	€210,958
423	€1,000 - €2,000	€617,135
533	€2,000 - €5,000	€1,742,488
205	€5,000 - €10,000	€1,438,574
113	€10,000 - €25,000	€1,671,957
76	€25,000 plus	€8,873,136
1,673		€14,554,248

Commercial Rates Categories by Rate Band

There is no change to the commercial rate for 2023.

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 retention of the following incentives already agreed by the Members in previous Budgets:

- The continuation of the rates payment incentive scheme so that all rate payers, operating viable business, that are liable for an annual rate payment of €10,000 or less will receive a benefit of a 4% rebate in 2023 where rate bills are paid promptly and in full. Small business accounts for around 89% 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, Portarlinton, 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.
- Extension of the paint enhancement scheme to our smaller villages and towns.

THE WIDER LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONTEXT

The 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 Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport & Media,
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
11. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in respect of refugee matters.

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 is also of note that in addition to Government Departments, the Council operates service level agreements with:

- Irish Water*
- 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.

*A new Framework for the future relationship between Irish Water and the Local Authorities was agreed in June 2022. As a result, new legislation to establish Uisce Eireann on a standalone basis from January 1st next year is being prepared by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The existing Service level Agreement, due to expire in 2026, is to be replaced in the short term to take account of last summer's agreement. There will be no financial implications to the Revenue Budget for 2023.

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 2023 Budget.

BUDGET 2023 ... 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 2023 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 seven pathways of "Housing for All" 2022 to 2026.

The Council's housing programme as set out in the *"Laois County Council, Housing Delivery Action Plan"* is on course to deliver **over 900 new homes** in the period 2022 to end of 2026. 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 number of years, these resources are further set to expand in 2023 (particularly on the affordable housing side), 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). It is the Council's intention to deliver up to ten affordable houses in 2023 and provision has been made in the Budget for a contribution to the affordable housing subsidy to this end.

The Council continues to make steady progress under this programme and is on course to provide homes to **338 families** in the current year. In addition, the Council will have processed **177 HAP** applications this year thereby providing **515 applicants** with accommodation in the current year.

In the context of the consideration of the 2023 Revenue Budget it is useful to review delivery for each of the past 5 years and to note progress towards delivery of housing and accommodation to the end of 2022.

	Relets	LCC Acquisitions	LCC Construct	AHB Delivery	Leasing	Totals
2018	45	24	33	88	6	198
2019	50	42	7	26	8	138
2020	62	20	20	95	15	217
2021	56	20	40	117	30	263
2022	78	11	59	145	45	338

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

Homes delivered 2018 to 2022 = 1,154

In addition, over the period 2018 to 2022, the Council will have assisted over 1,650 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 2,804 families/applicants in the 5 year period to the end of 2022.

The prospects for 2023 and beyond are positive. At the current rate of progress it is expected that the Council will oversee provision of 461 homes to social housing applicants in the next year at a number of locations throughout the County. This does not include HAP allocations.

	Relets	LCC Acquisitions	LCC Construct	VOIDS	AHB delivery	Leasing	Total
2023	70	20	84	0	267	20	461

LCC target for homes to be delivered for 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 through the vacant homes office in 2023 so that many more derelict buildings can be examined and acquired for refurbishment using enhanced CPO procedure as appropriate.

In the context of the Croí Cónaithe Fund and the Housing Delivery Action Plan the Council will continue to operate at a high level of activity 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 75% 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 ,
- Prepare a number of plans for consideration as serviced sites at various locations throughout the County.

In the area of preventing homelessness, the Council continues to prioritise this matter and expenditure of €882,000 is provided for this purpose in 2023. This represents an increase of €154,000 over 2022 and will ensure that the Council can work with service providers, provide out of hours services and make available more capacity for emergency short term accommodation locally.

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 2023 Revenue Budget provides **€4,355,000** for the maintenance and improvement of its approximately 2,300 housing units. This represents an increase of €1.8million over the past 5 years.

RESPONDING TO THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia last February has resulted in one of the greatest displacements of people since the second World War. Ireland along with European partners is playing its role under the Temporary Protection Directive to provide shelter and accommodation to Ukrainian citizens fleeing their war torn country. At a local level in Laois this Council has set up a temporary

department to work hand in hand with the Department of Housing and local Government, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the International Protection Accommodation Service the Irish Red Cross and other stakeholders in an effort to coordinate action on the ground. Laois County Council leads on the business of the Ukrainian Community Response Forum. Membership of the Forum is 44 representatives drawn from 23 separate state and voluntary agencies. The Forum has convened on 10 occasions to date and is currently meeting on a monthly basis.

It is anticipated that the Forum and the temporary internal department will be in place for the duration of 2023. At the time of writing there are 705 Ukrainian refugees accommodated in several towns and villages in the County by way of hotels, guesthouses, private host families or specific purpose accommodation operating under a contract between property owners and IPAS.

In the year ahead it is envisaged that Laois County Council will:

- Continue to engage with homeowners in the matter of pledged accommodation;
- Liaise with the OPW regarding the construction of modular homes at sites in the county
- Continue to engage with DCEDIY and Department of Housing in the identification of suitable accommodation options including the activation and refurbishment of vacant homes and properties
- Continue to lead and coordinate the business of the Ukrainian Community Response Forum with a view to streamlining the delivery of services to and facilitating the integration of Ukrainian citizens into our Laois community.

CLIMATE ACTION, ENVIRONMENT AND FLOOD RELIEF

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 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 2021 and in so doing places a statutory obligation on each local authority to prepare a sectoral climate action plan. The 2023

Budget provides for the preparation of such a plan as well as the preparation of a renewable energy plan for the Midlands region. €89,000 is provided in this regard. A sum of €50,000 is also provided in respect of the preparation of a new Biodiversity Action Plan.

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.
- Assisted communities with applications under the Sustainable Energy Communities programme

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
- Completed work on the first phase of 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 planned to become operational in mid- 2023

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 (65% 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.

The Council was awarded funding from the Just Transition Fund in 2021 for the deep retrofitting of 157 Council owned houses. This work is reaching completion and a review on costs and benefits will be carried out in association with University of Galway in the new year. Further retrofitting will be undertaken on Council housing throughout the year with support from the DHLGH.

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 county. In addition, the Environment Department of LCC will continue to carry out inspections under the Good Agricultural Practice Regulations and will provide advice as to the necessary programme of measures necessary for good nutrient management and environmental protection.

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 2023 budget and a sum of €1,600,000 is allocated to support enterprise, training, marketing 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 recent years and in equipping business to embrace on line opportunities as they arise.

Members will be aware that the Council owned land bank (79acres) at J17 National Enterprise Park has now been sold in its entirety. The remaining work to be carried out by the Council at this location involves the construction of the final phase (900metre) of link road and services to honour commitments to purchasers and to complete the park in accordance with the Masterplan for the area.

The new Glanbia EU Cheese manufacturing plant became operational in mid summer 2021 and is exporting Laois made products to Europe on a daily basis, Alpha Drives Ltd has completed its new building on site and planning permission has been granted or in process in respect of three other entities. The eight companies that have purchased sites will have the potential to employ on aggregate 500 people in the period ahead .

Members should also note that work has on the refurbishment of the CUBE building on Tower Hill, Portlaoise is nearing completion and will be open for business in December 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 2023.

Further work will continue in 2023 under the Just Transition Fund whereby Laois County Council acting on behalf of the four midland counties has resourced and established a programme for promoting the Midland network of Co Working Facilities and promote digital marketing for the region.

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. This plan is due for renewal and a sum of €100,000 has been included in this regard. 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 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.

TOURISM, HERITAGE RURAL REGENERATION

Work is set to continue in 2023 on the Urban Regeneration Development funded projects in Portlaoise and on the Market House in Portarlinton and at Borris in Ossory Courthouse, the latter two being funded under the Rural Regeneration Fund. The Council will complete work in respect of Portlaoise Destination Town project funded through Fáilte Ireland (€674,437) .

A sum of €360,000 has been included for footpath repair and upgrade in 2023. This will result in public realm improvements in several of our towns.

Over sixty rural regeneration projects in Laois have benefitted through funding in the order of €15.5 million since 2019. These funds have come from programmes such as the Town and Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS), CLÁR, ORIS and the RRDF. The availability of such financial resources, aided by matched funding by Laois County Council, has progressed the tourism and recreational

capacity of the county and will continue to enhance the attractiveness of Laois as a tourism and events destination. In addition, Laois County Council through its Revenue Budget will continue to support communities and volunteers by way of Tidy Towns Grants, Community Enhancement Scheme, Tourism Grants, Sports and Recreational Grants, Cemetery Grants etc to the order of €847,000 in 2023.

A sum of €1,209,400 has been provided in the budget for street cleaning, playgrounds, parks, landscaping and maintenance of open spaces. This is in response to a very noticeable increase in the use of public facilities since the pandemic as well as the dual aim in attracting more visitors and economic activity to all parts of the county.

Tourism and hospitality made a welcome return in 2022 with many events and festivals once again gaining support of the Irish and international trade. Chief amongst them was Electric Picnic and the World Ploughing Championships attracting between them up to 400,000 people to our county. The 2023 Budget includes a sum of €21,500 in respect of support for the 2023 National Ploughing Championships to be held in Ratheniska.

Laois County Council will continue to plan for the development of visitor facilities at the Rock of Dunamase and at the Portlaoise Fort Protector under the Ireland Ancient East branding and with the support of Failte Ireland. The construction of additional parking spaces at Glenbarrow complete with public convenience will also be advanced in the year ahead.

The Council will continue to provide significant support to the Laois Chamber Alliance and will work collaboratively on developing the local tourism product. The 2023 budget provides a sum of €238,000 to assist and support the further development of tourism 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 the full trail available to visitors by the middle of the 2023. Matched funding of €380,000 is provided in the capital budget for 2023.

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 €175,000 is provided in respect of Donaghmore Workhouse, the Fintan Lalor Homestead and heritage work on five of the County's Old Churches, three under the Just Transition Fund Scheme.

CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2023 TO 2025

The elected members are obliged to consider an indicative three year capital programme. The Revenue Budget 2023 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 valued at €259 million will be presented at the Budget meeting of Laois County Council for noting by the members.

Development Contributions

At this point in 2022 just over €1,135,605 in development charges has been collected. The development levy contribution scheme was revised and approved by the Members in late 2017 and is due for review in 2023.

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 Chair and members of the Committee including Councillors Aisling Moran and Pdraig 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 Conor Bergin, Caroline Dwane-Stanley, Pdraig Fleming and John Joe Fennelly 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 and will continue their programmes 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 Paddy Bracken, Barry Walsh and Paschal Mc Evoy 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, housing, environmental improvement and service issues for their localities in 2022.

Conclusion

I wish to thank all the members of the Council, Cathaoirleach Councillor Thomasina Connell and her predecessor Councillor Conor Bergin for their continuing work in advancing the development and interests of the County during an extraordinarily challenging period.


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 2022 and to thank them for their outstanding public service to the people of Laois.

I wish to convey my compliments to the many staff of this Council who have provided top class public service during a tumultuous couple of years. I also wish to mention all those in our community who have given voluntary service in difficult times.

I wish to record my particular appreciation to Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance, to Julie Bergin, Financial Accountant, Donal Brennan, Simon Walton, Angela McEvoy, Directors of Services for their work in preparing the 2023 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 Dermot O Loughlin, A/Director of Services and to Carmel Mc Nicholl ,A/Director of Services in respect of dealing with the many issues arising from the Ukrainian crisis. 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 2023.

Mise le Meas,



John Mulholland

Chief Executive

3rd November 2022

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 6 years and expected delivery in 2022 and 2023.

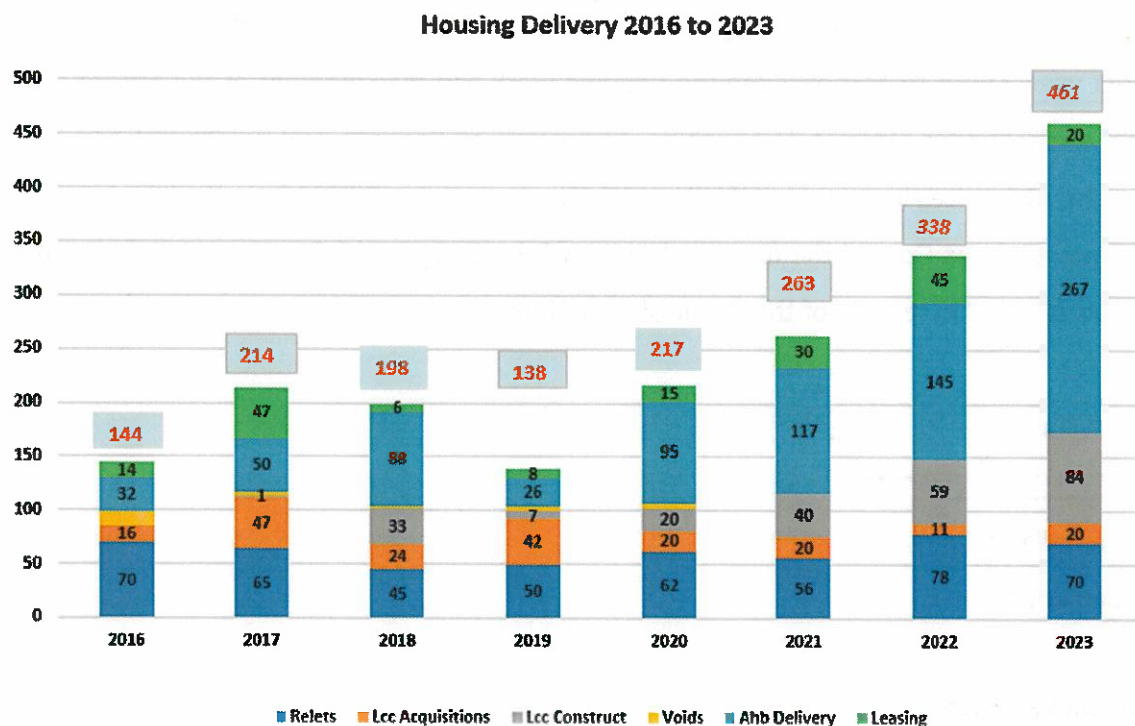


Figure 1. Social Housing Delivery 2016 - 2023

Figures below are the targets for social housing build delivery over the next 5 years as set out by the Dept of Housing. Also shown below is the programme of delivery as set out in the Laois Housing Delivery Action Plan 2022-2026 as defined under Housing for All.

Housing for All 2022-2026 Social Housing Build Delivery Target

Year	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Total
Units	200	79	80	87	88	534

Housing Delivery Action Plan 2022-2026 – Social Housing Build Delivery programme

Year	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Total
Units	254	365	175	66	40	*900

*Total figure of 925 units published in HDAP includes 25 proposed LA Buy and Renew units. These units are not counted in social housing build delivery figures.

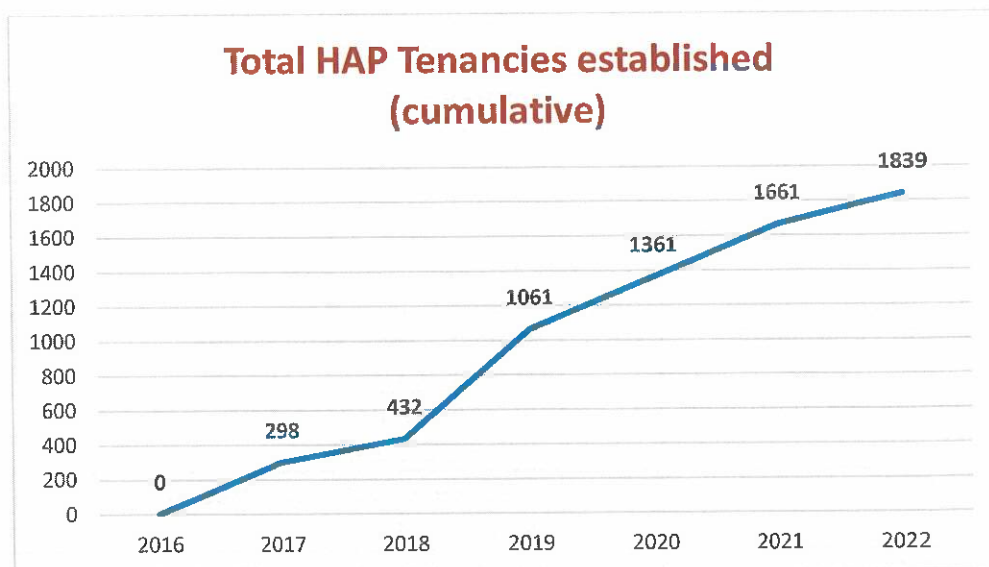


Figure 2: Housing Assistance Payment Tenancies established in Co. Laois

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		
Gleann na Glaise, Ballyroan	10	Direct Build , Complete
Pattison Estate, Mountmellick	10	Direct Build , Complete
Sean Doire, Durrow	22	Direct Build , Complete
Coolroe, Ballybrittas	1	Direct Build , Complete
Borris In Ossory	5	Turnkey – Complete
Bruach Na Habhainn	3	Turnkey – Complete
Holdbrook, Portlaoise	10	Cluid – Phase 2 (10 units) delivered
Roselawn, Portlaoise	15	Cluid – delivered
Clonrooske Abbey, Portlaoise	15	Cluid – delivered
Spa Street, Droughill, Portarlington	26	Oaklee Housing – delivered
The Orchard, Ballylinan	2	Turnkey – delivered
Under Construction		
Moore Street, Rathdowney	6	Direct Build , under construction Delivery Q.2 2023
Harbour Court Mountmellick	6	Direct Build , under construction Delivery Q.2 2023
Bruach Na Habhainn, Killeen	1	Turnkey – Contractor on site Delivery Q.2 2023
Church Avenue, Stradbally	31	Turnkey – Contractor on site Delivery Q.4 2023
The Orchard, Ballylinan	3	Turnkey – Contractor on site Delivery of 2 in Q. 4 2022
Market Square, Portarlington	18	Turnkey – Contractor on site Delivery Q.2 2023
Oak Park Halting Site, Portlaoise	4	Direct Build, under construction Delivery Q.3 2023
St. Kieran's, Errill	14	Direct Build, under construction Delivery Q.4 2023
Mooreville, Rathdowney	7	Direct Build, under construction Delivery Q.4 2023
Clonrooske Abbey, Portlaoise	17	Cluid – contractor on site Delivery Q.2 2023
The Maltings	40	Cluid – contractor on site (3 phases)

		Delivery Q.2 2023
Harpurs Lane, Portlaoise	44	Respond – Contractor on site Delivery Q.1 2023
Ballymorris Green, Portarlinton	30	Cluid – contractor on site 15 homes in Q.4 2022 15 homes in Q.2 2023
The Springs, Kilminchy, Portlaoise	43	On site
Goldencroft, Portlaoise (Old CBS site)	67	3 Phases–on site. Ph 1 (13 units)expected delivery Q4 2022
Doirinn Alainn, Ballylinan (Phase 4)	9	Under construction, expected delivery Q4 2022
South Dublin Road, Kilminchy	36	On site – 3 phases for delivery during 2023
The Meadows Portlaoise	48	Currently on site – expected delivery Q3 2023

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 2022 (up to 31/09/22), 3,562 repair requests have been requested of the Council (Figure 3) and 3,380 have been completed.

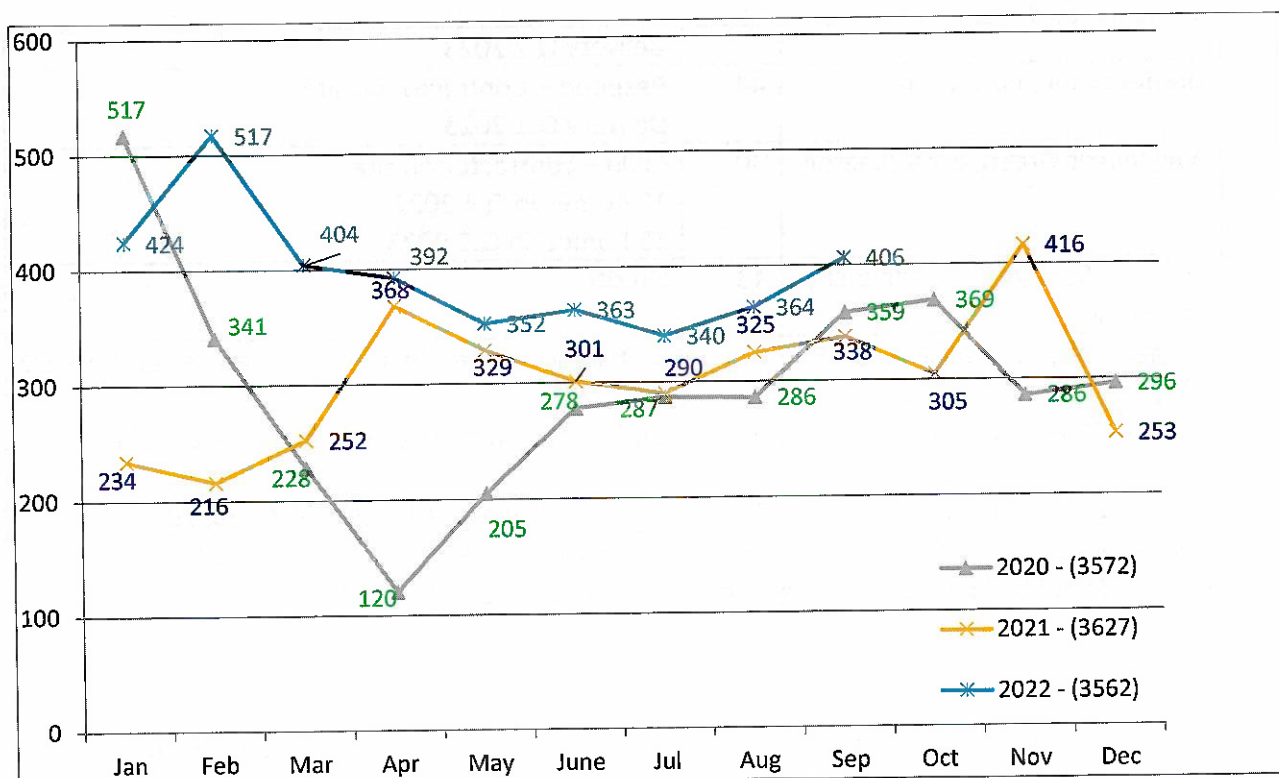


Figure 3: Repair requests to Laois County Council housing units.

The management and repair of surrendered housing units is also a core objective of this Council. To date in 2022 (up to 31/09/22), keys to 45 units (Figure 3) have been surrendered and re-let repairs to 58 units been completed.

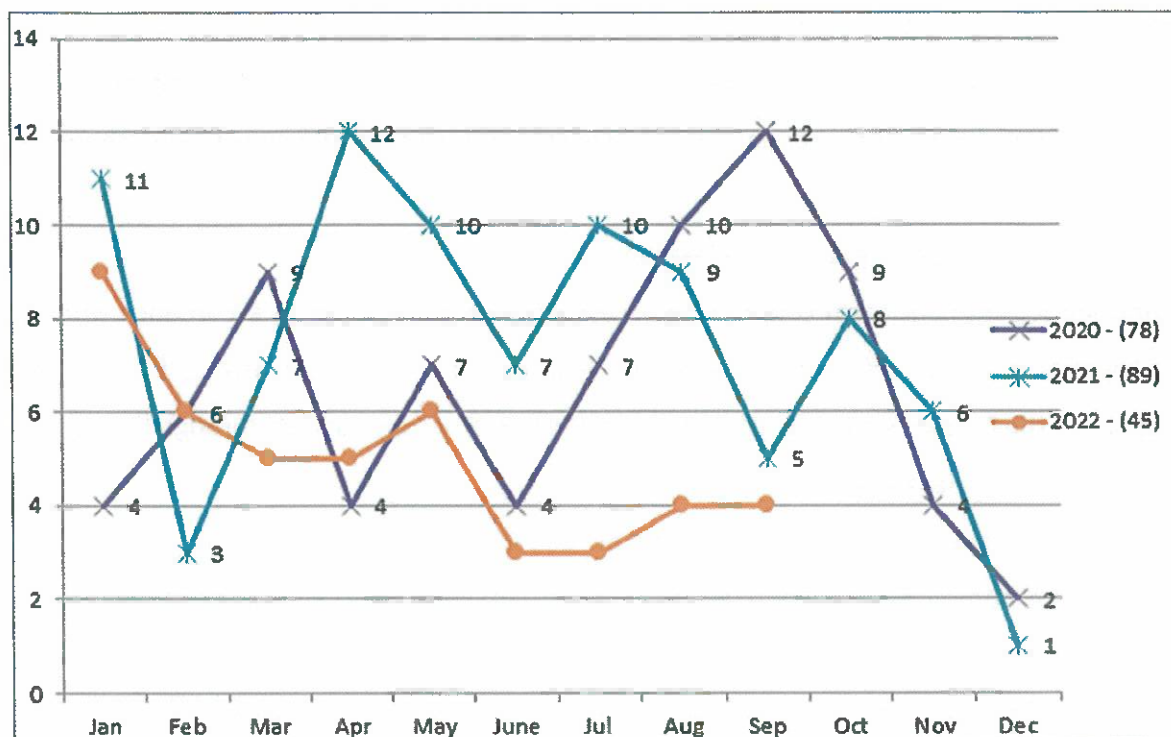


Figure 4: Surrender of Laois County Council housing units.

Retrofitting of 159 houses will be completed in Q4 2022 and this is funded as part of the midlands energy retrofit pilot programme.

Retrofitting of 28 units was also approved as part of the energy retrofit programme and 14 of these units have commenced in 2022 and the remaining 14 will be completed in 2023.

Retrofitting funding for a further 47 units has been approved. (There will be a match funding requirement from the Council in the above regard, which will be determined when tender prices are returned.)

Surveys of these properties (listed below) commenced in Q3 2022 and tenders will be advertised in Q4 2022.

- 1) Thornberry, Abbeyleix – 16 units.
- 2) Church Avenue, Stradbally – 9 units.
- 3) Slieve Bloom Park, Clonaslee – 8 units.
- 4) St. John's Square, Portlaoise – 7 units.
- 5) Old School Road, Ballylinan – 7 units.

In other areas of housing, so far in 2022:

- 24 loans have been approved under the new Local Authority Home Loan Scheme;
- 61 works approved and underway in respect of the Disabled Persons Grant scheme for social houses and;
- 245 private housing grants have been approved.

The Housing Assessment team continue to access housing applications in accordance with the 2011 Regulations in an efficient and effective manner. There are currently 1,795 approved applicants on the Council's housing list, but this includes 898 accommodated through the Housing Assistance Programme (HAP).

The number of homeless presentations to date in 2022 is 183. Currently, there are 21 households in emergency accommodation, that is, 9 single persons, 10 family units with 20 children.

The numbers presenting with Notices of Termination (NTQ's) continues to be a challenge and Laois County Council has spent €396,633.36 on emergency accommodation to date in 2022. The HAP Placement Finder has intervened in 44 cases to prevent homelessness. This will continue to be area of pressure in 2023.

Regeneration

This continues to be a critical function for the Directorate going into 2023 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 in 2023

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

The Council will in 2023 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 the finalisation of the mapping for the Residential Zoned Land Tax in 2022.

The Council will continue to work on addressing the effects of vacant and underutilised/derelict houses/sites through its Vacant Home Office in conjunction with the Derelict Sites technician and planning section. This co-ordinated action across the Directorate will be strengthened in 2023.

UKRAINIAN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

In March 2022, correspondence from the Department of An Taoiseach to Local Authorities highlighted the imminent arrival of a significant number of displaced Ukrainians to Ireland. As part of the overall national response to this humanitarian crisis, there were a number of immediate asks of the Council:

- To identify suitable available accommodation options within the county and to assist the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) with the accommodation of a number of the new arrivals into Ireland
- To establish and lead a “Ukrainian Crisis Multi Agency Response Forum” along the lines of and largely similar to the Covid-19 Community Response Forum which sat in 2020 and 2021.
- To assemble lists of suitable vacant premises in our county that could be considered to accommodate refugees, so to develop short and long term responses that meet our country’s obligations under the Temporary Protection Directive.
- To provide details of suitable sites for consideration for medium to long term accommodation solutions.

The Council met all of these obligations during the course of 2022. Current arrangements remain that costs arising are met centrally by government.

The new Ukrainian Response Forum convened for its first meeting on Wednesday 23rd March at which a number of tasks and local actions were agreed. Membership of the Forum is 44 representatives drawn from 23 separate state and voluntary agencies. The Forum has convened on 10 occasions to date and is currently meeting on a monthly basis.

Unfortunately, the crisis has proved to be an extended one and the Council in response put in place a dedicated team to provide the necessary supports and address the many issues arising, effective from 1st July 2022.

Ukrainian citizens are currently hosted at IPAS contracted centres in Durrow, Abbeyleix, Portlaoise, Mountmellick and Clonaslee. Many others have also come into the county through their own means, some residing with families in private arrangements, accommodated via the various parishes and also in private rented accommodation.

In addition, effective from mid July 2022, Council staff took over the management of the Irish Red Cross pledged accommodation list and have worked to relocate local Ukrainian families to vacant pledged properties and to shared accommodation arrangements with local host families. At time of writing there are estimated to be approximately 700 Ukrainians living in County Laois.

A new call for vacant properties is planned shortly, and this will be managed and administered by the Council. The Council will continue to meet its obligations and support the humanitarian response effort into 2023 and for as long as is deemed necessary by Government.

PLANNING

Laois County Council in conjunction with Carlow County Council commenced work on the Joint Urban Area Plan for Carlow Graiguecullen in September 2022, this will continue in 2023 which will ultimately set a joint land use and policy framework for this key town within the Midlands and South Region. Local Area Plan preparation for the towns of Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Mountmellick will continue through 2023 and will be aligned with the Local Transport Plans for each of the towns.

It is proposed to prepare a Renewable Energy Strategy for Co Laois in 2023 to identify the needs of the county in terms of Climate Action measures. This will be informed by the Climate Action Plan also due to be prepared in 2023.

3 estates have been taken in charge to date in 2022 with a further 3 estates advertised to be taken in charge in early 2023. Further estates are currently being worked on and will be proposed for taking in charge by the end of 2023.

While the overall number of planning applications has decreased in 2022, there have been pre-planning meetings for a variety of developments which may come to fruition in 2023. The move to E-Planning which will enable applicants to make their planning applications on line will continue to be rolled out in 2023 to members of the public.

The Heritage service had a productive year in 2022. Planned projects for 2023 Planned projects for 2023 are expansion of the projects to commemorate James Fitzmaurice and the Portlaoise Plane, and the annual Heritage Awareness programme (including Heritage Week and Science week events) and a study on climate risk for heritage sites.

The proposed budget provides for the following:

- Work will assist in maximising drawdown of funding through the Community Monuments Fund on Sites such as Clonkeen Graveyard Abbeyleix and Ballyadden Graveyard Ballybrittas in 2023.
- 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 aforementioned digital planning service, public awareness in the community, skills development, etc will continue to be pursued in 2023.

SERVICE DIVISION – ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM SUPPORT

ECONOMIC AND ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT IN LAOIS

The Council's Business Support Unit (BSU) and the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) work hand in hand from their shared base at County Hall and form an integral part of the organisation's strategic approach to promoting economic growth 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 2023 budget and a sum of €1,600,000 is allocated to support enterprise, training, mentoring, business continuity and innovation in the county.

In 2023 the BSU/LEO will focus on:

- Supporting businesses and enterprises as they continue to adapt to and recover from the challenging economic environment and impact of Brexit, Covid 19 and the ongoing Ukrainian crisis.
- Supporting businesses as they face up to the challenges of climate change and adopting new technologies and practices to become more environmentally sustainable and resource efficient.
- Supporting new projects through the provision of direct financial assistance.
- Co-ordinating training and mentoring support for businesses.
- Continuing to co-ordinate a wide range of initiatives designed to foster a culture of enterprise including the Student Enterprise Programme, business networks, promotional campaigns, etc.

- Continuing to promote the Business Incentive Scheme, Shopfront Grant Scheme, Town and Village Streetscape Enhancement Scheme, etc to help revitalise the county's main commercial centres.
- Ongoing promotion of the county as a viable and attractive location for investment.
- Implementing actions designed to deliver future economic growth which are outlined in the Local Economic and Community Plan and the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan.

In 2018, the Portlaoise Innovation Centre DAC received funding of €2,050,560 under Enterprise Ireland's Regional Enterprise Development Fund towards a low carbon centre of excellence to be based in Portlaoise. Works on the centre are at an advanced stage and it is hoped to have the first tenants in place by the end of November 2022.

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.

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 Alliance, the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and the business community will continue to be one of the Council's main goals in 2023. In this regard, we will continue to promote remote working in the County as a more sustainable form of work. 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. Under the new LEADER Programme, Laois has been allocated €5.7 million which will support rural development and enterprise projects over the next five years.

The LCDC 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 process of preparing a new Local Economic and Community Plan has commenced.

The LCDC, also, works in an oversight and partnership role with Laois Partnership in delivering the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) in the County.

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

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The Laois Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) manage or provide oversight to the distribution of:

- Distribution of €273,048 to 132 groups under the Community Activities Fund
- The Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme with a budget of €694,860 and an additional Ukrainian allocation of €83,548
- The LEADER 2014-2020 Programme, operating through the auspices of the Laois Local Action Group (LAG), concluded on the 31st March 2021 having approved 134 projects to the value of €5,557,492.21.
- The Transitional LEADER programme commenced on the 1st April 2021 with a project budget allocation of €1,092,976. To date, under the Transitional LEADER programme, 35 projects have been approved.
- 11 projects have been approved under the European Union Recovery Instrument Fund (EURI) with a project allocation of €485,767, through Laois LAG

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 wellbeing initiatives in the county.

This year has seen further progress under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme with the majority of the previously funded projects approaching completion. During the year the Department of Rural and Community Development announced a further tranche of funding totalling €1,151,347.50 for 7 community projects throughout the County.

Laois Connects Mental Health and Wellbeing Awareness programme took place during the month of October with free events taking place across the county for the month. This was a hugely successful event organised by a multi-agency working group to raise awareness for positive mental health.

Laois County Council supported one entry – Ballinakill in the 2022 IPB All-Island Pride of Place competition. Judging took place in September and results will be announced in January.

The Council continued its positive and collaborative working relationship with Laois PPN. During 2022, with a large and diverse membership base of 653 Member Groups across the County. Laois PPN in collaboration with Laois County Council supported by the Department of Rural Community Development, welcomed hundreds of delegates from all 31 PPN's representing 18,000 groups nationally to Laois for the 2 day National PPN Conference on Friday 21st and Saturday 22nd October.

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

The Arts Office presented a wide ranging programme during 2022 including Bealtaine, Faoin Spéir, National Poetry Day, Seachtain na Gaeilge, Platform 31, Creative Ireland programme, artists in schools, and summer arts programme.

Laois Culture Night was a huge success with a packed programme of 15 events taking place on Friday 23rd September. Laois had a broad spectrum of events to enliven the county happening from 4pm until late. New venues came on board this year. The highlight of the evening was the official launch of 'Protectour' by Artist James Hayes. This artwork was commissioned under Open Competition by Laois County Council and funded by the Per Cent for Art scheme. The sculpture will be launched by Cathaoirleach Thomasina Connell. In Mountmellick a new street mural by artist James Kirwan, in celebration of the Swift – a bird that flourishes in the area was unveiled. In Portarlinton, the Port Art Collective presented the Port Art Crawl. From the library down to French Church Street, places and spaces to showcase Portarlinton's cultural and artistic talent, with pop up exhibitions, music performances, dance, craft, photography and more.

The Local Live Public Performance Scheme received two further tranches of funding and this resulted in multiple activities taking place countywide animating venues, hospitals, outdoor spaces and bringing much needed funding to artists and entertainment for the public. The 10 year celebration exhibition entitled "*In Trust. In Gratitude. In Hope*" brought many schools and groups to Laois Arthouse. The Arts Office and Council members and management received an invitation

to Áras an Uachtaráin to mark the 10th anniversary. The Leaves Festival 2022 brings the best of Irish writing and music to Co Laois this November. The festival is delighted to welcome Booker Prize shortlisted Claire Keegan as its 1st festival length writer in residence. Her Booker Prize shortlisted novel *Small Things Like These* has had an extraordinary public reception since publication and Claire will join us for a public event with novelist & broadcaster Edel Coffey as well as a series of workshops in schools, libraries and prison. *Small Things Like These* is also the October One County One Book for Laois. There will also be 2 screenings of the award winning film *An Cailín Ciúin* based on Claire Keegan's story *Foster*

A Public Art Committee was established and it will endeavour to ensure that budgets are availed of and a programme devised. The Committee met twice and had a presentation by Mary McAuliffe, Public Art Policy & Development Advisor at the Arts Council on her brief to develop a government policy which local authorities will utilise also.

RECREATION, SPORT AND PLAY

Laois Leisure continue to operate both Portlaoise and Portarlinton Leisure Centres, with a newly restructured board representative of both localities. Portlaoise Leisure Centre reopened in March 2022 following a twenty-three-month closure during which extensive refurbishment works were carried out. Refurbishment tiling and drainage works on Portarlinton pool will commence in 2023. Funding of €440,000 was allocated under the Sports Capital Programme towards the upgrade of both leisure facilities.

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 2022. Twenty-one play facilities continue to be managed, maintained and upgraded by Laois County Council. Laois County Council commenced the management of Ballinakill playground following its completion in March 2022. A new community playgrounds and multi-use games area (MUGA) is under construction in Borris in Ossory, and CLÁR funding has been awarded to Trumera Community Hall and Ballypickas GAA to develop play facilities. In June 2022 Laois County Council

completed an accessibility upgrade of Portlaoise Leisure Centre playground and in September 2022 a refurbishment of Doonane playground. Laois County Council are actively assisting this community with various funding applications. Additionally, Portlaoise and Portarlinton public parks retained their Green Flag Awards in August 2022. Under Healthy Ireland Funding Laois County Council commenced a Playful Spaces project aimed at redesigning green spaces with local residents in three social housing area in Stradbally, Portlaoise and Mountrath. Laois County Council were successfully awarded funding for 11 projects under Measure 1 of CLÁR 2022 totalling €444,105 and Laois County Council received confirmation in August 2022 from DRCD that an initial allocation under ORIS for 7 projects of €219,712 inclusive of an allocation of €41,463 for Durrow Walking & Cycling Hub feasibility study.

Laois County Council secured funding of €22,500 to deliver a National Bike Week programme in June 2022, with over 2000 people taking part in 30 cycling events organised by Laois County Council and our community partners. Laois County Council delivered a range of outdoors events to celebrate National Play Day and National Recreation Week in July 2022.

CLIMATE

Laois County Council is progressing the 'Greening of Portlaoise Town Centre together with the delivery of a walkable town centre. The Council is also engaged in the Greener Together initiative which brings local public sector organisations together to collaborate on Climate Action issues. Work is currently underway on a Biodiversity Demonstration Garden at Laois Education Centre. A Cycle Bus has been established in Portlaoise Town which provides a confidence building starter group for families who would like to cycle to school. Laois County Council provides hi-visibility vests and promotional material for the cycle bus.

Laois County Council has supported the establishment of several Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) in the county including Durrow, Portarlinton, Abbeyleix and Portlaoise. Support is also provided by way of bridge funding for Energy Master Plans.

Laois County Council is the lead authority of the Midland Energy Agency which comprises five local authorities working in collaboration to meet 2030 national targets. The council is currently preparing a project pipeline to assist in meeting the target of 51% carbon reduction.

HUMAN RESOURCES

The level of recruitment activity during the year has significantly increased as vacancies continued to arise from retirements, resignations and centrally funded positions.

23 recruitment competitions have been held year to date in 2022. This resulted in a total of 339 candidates being interviewed. Further recruitment will continue to year end as required. A total of 117 staff appointments have been made to date in 2022.

CORPORATE AFFAIRS

The Electoral Reform Act, 2022 which was signed into law on the 25th of July 2022 provides the legislative underpinning for a range of significant electoral reforms in line with the commitments in the Programme for Government and includes provision for the modernisation of the electoral registration process including moving to a rolling Register and the standardisation and simplification of the registration process.

In relation to facilities management, extensive refurbishment works were carried out to the Executive Conference Room and meeting rooms during the year. The lighting in the Council Chamber along with the audio and visual system were also upgraded. The Council continues to monitor the use of electricity and gas throughout County Hall and to identify measures to improve efficiency and cost savings.

LIBRARY SERVICE

Public Libraries continued to offer an efficient frontline service for all members providing them with free access to books, media, government and Council information, online services and internet/wifi/printing facilities. Public Libraries in Laois re- opened fully throughout the County in January 2022 post level 5 public health government guidelines and offering full services . 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 January- September (9 months)2022 the library has issued over 100,000 books and over 20,000(January -September) 2022 e-books and e-resources.

Portlaoise New Library –Works continued on the new library on Main Street Portlaoise with a planned handover date of early Q1 2023 enabling furniture , shelving including stock and IT fitout to commence , planned opening date of March 2023 . Laois County Council is committed to the development of the new library and will facilitate the provision of educational, cultural, information for the community and our visitors. Occupying a central location on the Main Street the library will form a significant element of The Cultural Quarter development in the historic core of Portlaoise showcasing the Fort Protector and Fitzmaurice Place. The library has been designed to be universally accessible, welcoming and inclusive to all communities as well as providing study space, meeting rooms, sensory library services and a dedicated Local History and Studies reference and reading room.

Free Little Library Bag Laois County Library Service provided a “My Little Library book bag to every child starting school in September for collection in the library, encouraging children to join their local library. The book bags are available in either Irish or English. To date over 700 bags have been distributed in the county increasing library membership in this age category and attracting over 500 new library members in this age category. To help children navigate starting school, libraries have put together a bag of books especially for them that can be collected at any library. The initiative is a collaboration between libraries, the Department of Rural and Community

Development, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth as part of the First 5 Strategy.

Dormant Accounts and Heritage Grant Funding

The library service were awarded Dormant Account Funding for four library projects below totalling €27,035 Sanctuary Library project -Supporting parents (parenting classes and resources) - , Sensory Library (Equipment and Resources) and Literacy software for reading .The library Service were awarded €8614 under the Heritage Councils “ Heritage stewardship Scheme for preservation and provide access to two collections of historic photographs relating to County Laois, the Ivo De-Vesci Collection owned by Viscount De-Vesci and the recently donated O'Brien Collection. The Ivo De-Vesci Collection documents the De-Vesci family and landed estate in Laois from 1900-1957. It is a collection of local, social and national historical significance.

Summer stars reading challenge 2022 and Storystroll 2022

The library service has signed up over 1200 children in the county to its annual summer star reading programme. During the months of June July and August we were delighted to welcome back our younger readers. A county wide event programme hosting over 170 individual events were held to encourage young readers to join the library. For 2022 the library service created and hosted a Library Storystroll in outdoor public parks. The Storystroll reproduced in full the children's book “Wee Donkeys treasure Hunt “ by Erika McGann so that children and families could read along and then visit their local library to complete a treasure hunt and quiz. Over 1700 free craft bags were created and collected for young readers and families coming into the library

Library of Sanctuary Initiative

As part of the Library of Sanctuary Programme the library service accessed Dormant accounts funding to create a guide to services and community primarily aimed at those who had moved recently to Laois or even to Ireland. The information booklet is a very concise signpost to services and some community involvement for the county. It covers areas such as emergency services, social entitlements and health, accessing school, travel and accommodation. It also suggests avenues for anyone who wishes to get involved in the community. The booklet was also translated

to Ukrainian. The Library services purchased Ukrainian Books for children and adults to library stock and have online newspapers, e-books and other forms and information and resources in Ukrainian and other languages. We hope as new communities arrive in Laois, that they will think of the library service as a resource to make the transition to life in Laois a little easier.

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, Laois County Council carried out internal and external vulnerability tests across all our IT infrastructure and are mitigating any findings appropriately. 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 examination of internal and public forms with a view to developing electronic forms for submissions. We successfully digitised the Housing Repairs process, HR forms, and have started an engagement process with staff & the public in revamping our website www.laois.ie.

The Council has recently moved to Microsoft Teams Telephony to support seamless communications, whether in the office or working remotely and all its meeting rooms and Council Chambers have been updated with technology to allow hybrid meetings with virtual attendance by participants.

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

Roads/Transportation

The **Roadworks Programme 2023** will be presented to Elected Members in March 2023, following notification of Department of Transport and Transport Infrastructure Ireland grants. In that context, this budget reflects anticipated, similar levels of funding to that provided in 2022.

Local expenditure, to be allocated to Roads and Transportation for 2023, is consistent with 2022 funding levels. As advised to Elected Members previously, such arrangement will give rise to an overall reduction of 15 – 20% in terms of outputs. This is due to increased material, utility and fuels costs etc.

It is of note that, to date, **car parking income** has not returned to pre-pandemic levels and income levels (€405,000) set out in the 2023 Revenue Budget reflect reduced parking demand.

As advised to Members in the lead-in to Budget 2023, energy supply costs to the **public lighting network** are set to increase by up to €150,000 in 2023. **Provision is made for increased energy costs to the public lighting network.** The Council's inventory of public lights is just over 10,000, 64% of which has been retrofitted to LED. Without retrofitting to more energy efficient lighting, increased energy costs of €300,000 would be required for 2023.

In 2020 Elected Members approved a multi annual approach to **River Drainage Maintenance** and the first three years of works have been undertaken. In the main, 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 2023 Programme of Works.

The 2023 Budget provides €474,000 for Drainage Maintenance, €357,000 of which is Laois County Council funds. Unspent allocations from previous years are capitalised and carried forward as the new Multi Annual approach gathers momentum.

Following the establishment of the Active Travel Unit in 2022 Budget 2023 also provides for anticipated grant allocation of €3,000,000 from NTA, to fund and deliver a Smarter Travel focussed Transportation Programme.

This budget provides similar levels of funding compared to 2022 for public realm maintenance/street cleaning.

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 at Kyletelesha is performing very well and represents an additional, significant source of income for Laois County Council.

This budget continues to fund 43 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, the clean-up of illegal dumping and anti-dumping initiatives. This Budget, subject to statutory provisions, will also enable the appropriate deployment of covert infrastructure designed to capture persons disposing of waste illegally.

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.

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 2022 the enforcement officers investigated numerous illegal dumping incidents, resulting in the removal of over 300 tonnes of waste across County Laois. The 2023 Budget enables a similar level of service.

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 Framework Agreement with Irish Water, the Water Services Authority. Annual costs incurred by Laois County Council are recouped by the Council from Irish Water and the 2023 Budget reflects such provision. 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 2023 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 2023 Budget outlines a net spend on day to day operations in the sum of €4.46 million.

The service is provided across 8 Fire Stations serving a growing population. In line with increasing call outs this Budget provides €2.5m for mobilisation costs incurred in response to Fire & Emergency Events. A sum of €985,000 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.). A sum of €471,000 is provided for Fire Personnel training in 2022.

To fund Laois County Council's role as a Principal Responder to Major Emergency Events this budget allocates €109,500 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.