

Laois County Council

Comhairle Chontae Laois

*“Doing the
Right Things Right”*



Charter for
Socially
Inclusive
Services

2005

In a Word or Two

Our Charter for Socially Inclusive Services fits within the Council's overall Customer Charter. The overall Customer Charter has eight basic Themes.

Courtesy and Consideration

You are at all times entitled to be served:

- * in a courteous and prompt manner
- * with due regard to privacy and confidentiality
- * by helpful and supportive employees

Equality and Diversity

We will

- * treat all our customers equally
- * aim to identify and work to eliminate barriers that may prevent or hinder our customers in using our services

Information

We undertake, in so far as is possible, to:

- * provide information to our customers that is clear, up to date and accurate
- * increase the access to information for our Customers through the use of Information Technology

Access

We endeavour to:

- * provide clean, accessible public offices that ensure privacy, comply with occupational health and safety standards and that facilitate access for people with disabilities and special needs

Service Through Irish

We will endeavour to:

- * accommodate our customers, if you wish to conduct your business through Irish

Communication Responses

In relation to telephone contacts we will endeavour to:

- * answer your telephone calls in a timely manner
- * ensure that an employee will give you his/her name and the name of the department in which he/she works
- * take your contact details and call you back at an agreed time if your query cannot be dealt with immediately at the time of your call
- * respond to voicemail messages within 2 days

In relation to written contacts we will endeavour to:

- * acknowledge all written communications within 5 working days
- * provide a comprehensive reply within 21 working days
- * advise you of the reason for the delay in cases where this is not possible and issue you with regular updates,
- * include the name and contact number of the individual dealing with your query in all our correspondence
- * use clear simple language whenever possible and use technical terms only when absolutely necessary

In relation to personal contacts we will endeavour to:

- * be available to help you and be polite and courteous in all our dealings with you
- * arrange meetings at a time that suits you and not to keep you waiting unnecessarily

- * answer your questions fully and if this is not possible immediately we will endeavour to do so at the earliest possible opportunity

Our Employees

We endeavour to:

- * ensure that you, our employees, are recognised as customers,
- * ensure that you are supported by management,
- * ensure that you are consulted through the use of the Workplace Partnership Committee

Customer Obligation

It is your responsibility, as a customer of Laois County Council:

- * to treat employees of the Council in a professional, courteous and civil manner at all times as our employees have the right to expect the same entitlements from you that you expect from them.

Customer Care

There may be occasions when the system will not function as well as we would wish.

Laois County Council has a simple and transparent Customer Complaints Procedure which you may use if you are in any way unhappy with the quality of the service afforded to you.

Council's Mission Statement

“We will provide leadership, develop, promote, protect and regulate our County, deliver quality public services so as to enhance the quality of life for the community”

Charter for Socially Inclusive Services

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What This Is About

The motto of Laois County Council is “I bpairt leis an bpobal” ... In partnership with the community. It’s a motto we take seriously and this Charter for Socially Inclusive Services is an example of the many ways we try to bring life to it.

Our Charter is about making you more aware of existing rights and services and about improving the accessibility of them. It’s also about us in the Council being more aware of the particular needs of particular groups, for example ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. In some cases that means changing how we do things, and not always relying on a one-size-fits-all approach.

In our Charter we’ve tried to be open and honest. Some of the changes needed are already in place or will happen quickly. Others will take time. In the same way, because this began as a pilot exercise, not all Council services are included at this stage. We hope you’ll bear with us as we take things forward.

Finally the Charter is really a “two-way contract” between the Council and the people of Laois. It spells out what we in the Council do and what we hope to do. But it also gives a sense of what we need you to do. When we say “I bpairt leis an bpobal”, we do mean what we say!

Larry Kavanagh
Cathaoirleach

Peter Carey
County Manager

April 2005

The Laois Charter
for Socially
Inclusive Services

... aims to ...

... Improve the
accessibility of Council
services ...

... Improve the quality
of Council services ...

... by ...

- ☺ helping the people of Laois understand what their Council does
- ☺ letting them know what they can expect from it
- ☺ giving a sense of what the Council expects from them in return
- ☺ outlining what to do if things go wrong

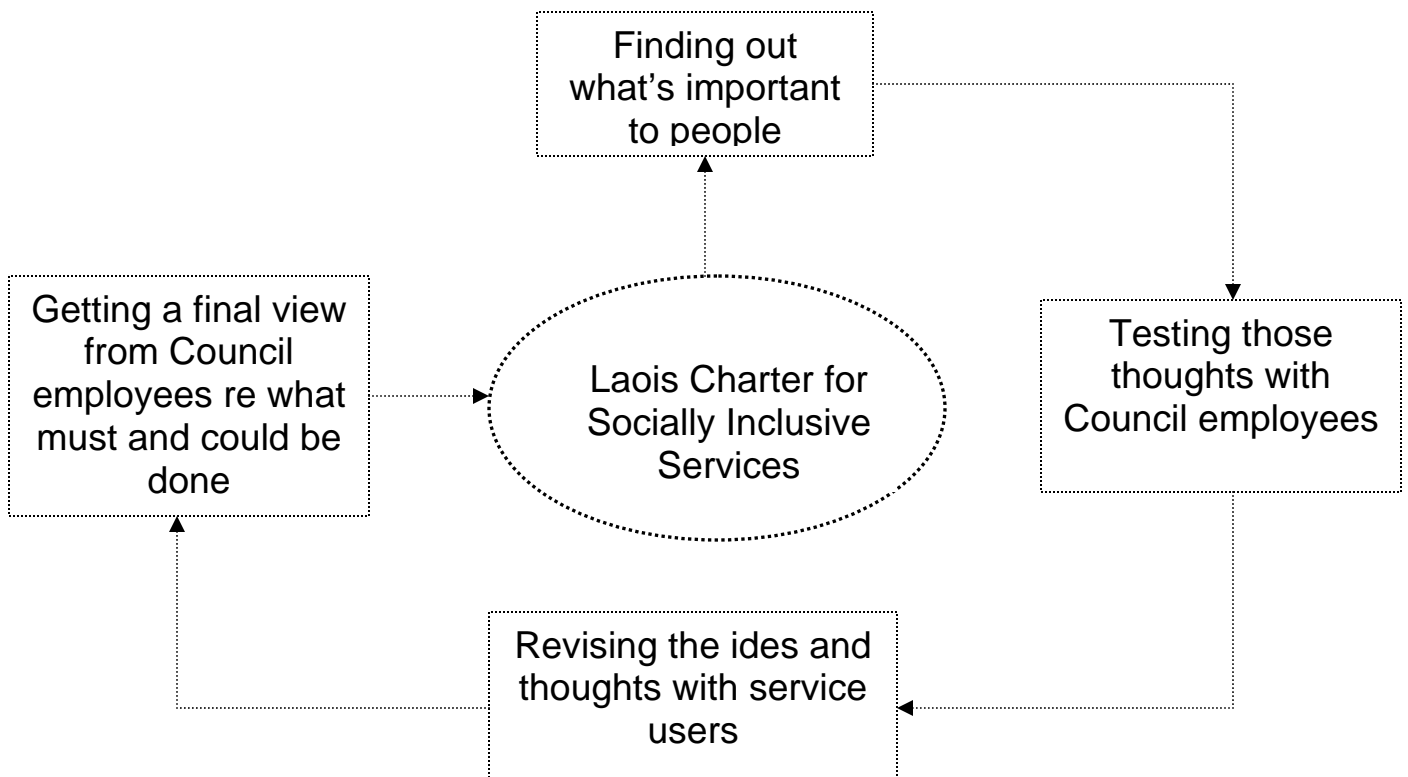
... so that ...

... the Council and the
people really do work
in partnership

How The Charter Was Produced

The development of the Laois Charter for Socially Inclusive Services was truly a partnership exercise in its own right. The work was taken forward during 2003 and 2004 by a combination of Laois County Council, Laois County Community Forum, Mountmellick Development Association, and Portlaoise Community Action Project. We call them the “Charter Partners”. Funding support meanwhile was provided by the Combat Poverty Agency.

Central to the work was the belief that the Charter had to be built around what’s important to service users. In particular, we wanted it to reflect the views of those who have the greatest need of our services. That meant we relied very heavily on consulting with and talking to users and their representatives. We also wanted to involve those Council employees who would ultimately have to deliver the Charter standards. We thus developed an overall approach which can be summed up as follows:



This approach produced a Charter which blends the “What” with the “How”.

Our Charter for Socially Inclusive Services dovetails with our new five year Corporate Plan and is also a practical, hands-on way of improving social inclusion across the County.

We intend to keep revisiting it and adding in new pieces as appropriate. Our aim is to continue to make things better to reflect the changing needs of our customers. One way we will do that is by using the Charter Partners to look at our performance against the Charter on an annual basis. We’ll report openly and honestly on that performance in the Council’s published Annual Report.

What You Can Expect From Us

All through the consultation process, people told us that how the Council dealt with them is a central part of their experience of the Council. On that basis we make the following promises or commitments to you. We will:

- ▲ see you as a person and a citizen
- ▲ treat you with dignity, courtesy, and respect
- ▲ make no assumptions about you
- ▲ give you time and listen to you, paying attention to what you say
- ▲ be real and honest with you in terms of what the Council can and can’t do, only promising you things we can and will deliver
- ▲ be helpful and constructive, aiming to leave you better placed than when you first contacted us.

To help us deliver on these commitments we will:

- ☺ continue to provide reception/meeting/consultation areas which are:
 - welcoming and friendly, putting you at your ease
 - private and confidential when needed
 - appropriately staffed
 - accessible by and useful to you if you have a disability

- ☺ continue to provide diversity training for our employees

- ☺ implement the Barcelona Declaration across the County by working closely with the “Laois County disability group/forum” being established in 2005

- ☺ continue to be an Equal Opportunity employer

- ☺ let people know the results of any Council consultation exercises

What We Expect From You

We’ve made it clear we see our Charter as a two-way contract. We need to help each other to make it work. We suggest it is reasonable that you should:

- ▲ obey our laws and regulations, national and local

- ▲ always vote in elections and referenda, be they local, national or European

- ▲ get involved in Council consultation exercises ... in the understanding that we’ll let people know the results of them

- ▲ actively participate in the Laois County Community Forum and its work

- ▲ understand and appreciate that the Council can't always do what it would like to do
- ▲ recognise that our employees work hard in what can often be difficult circumstances and that they too have their lives to live
- ▲ respect and therefore not abuse Council employees or Councillors
- ▲ respect Council or other public property and services
- ▲ hold to your side of any agreements we might enter into.

Our Charter Promises

As made clear earlier, this Charter reflects what people said was important to them in terms of Laois County Council services. Our consultations identified six priority areas or themes which are important to people. The six priority areas are listed below.

1 Communication

Why this is important

Simply not knowing what's going on ... or why things are as they are ... or what the Council can and can't do is very frustrating for people. They need to know where they stand and they want to be told that, "warts-and-all", clearly, simply and regularly.

What we will do in response

- ☺ make consistent use of the local media and networks to let the people of Laois and others know what we're doing, what we plan to do, and how we're performing
- ☺ use a variety of ways (Council publications, Council website www.laois.ie, and local media) to let people know and keep them up to date with "who-does-what/who-is-responsible-for-what" within the Council. We will provide employee names and contact details in these ways: some are included on the insert at the back of this Charter
- ☺ where possible, provide sign language interpretation and make information available in alternative formats
- ☺ acknowledge and/or respond to all phone/voice-mail/fax messages within two working days
- ☺ acknowledge and/or respond to all other queries/communication within five working days
- ☺ unless it is impractical or unnecessary, offer all customers/service users a face-to-face meeting with a relevant employee of Laois County Council
- ☺ use voicemail to let callers know when unavailable employees will be available and, if possible, what their interim contact details are
- ☺ always have an alternative to voicemail for callers
- ☺ continue to make available a Planning Information Pack
- ☺ provide, within two weeks of a request, a meeting with a Council Planner in Aras an Chontae, to discuss and resolve issues that might make a Planning Application invalid

- ☺ continue to meet planning agents once a year to explain Planning policy changes and discuss/resolve Planning issues and difficulties
- ☺ test our forms and other documents for “reader-friendliness” and, provided it doesn’t interfere with what the legislation might require, amend them accordingly
- ☺ provide two briefings each year on the activities of the Council to the Laois County Community Forum
- ☺ provide four Council open days across the County each year which will show people what the Council (or parts of it) does, how it’s organised, and what it’s like “from the inside”
- ☺ contribute to the CDB’s project (as agreed in its Integrated and Targeted Plan for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrant Workers) for making essential information available in languages other than English
- ☺ encourage the sectoral representatives on our Strategic Policy Committees to report back to their “parent” bodies or areas.

What we’re also looking at

- ☺ a Council telephone system which will be “caller friendly”, efficient, and effective.

2 Housing

Why this is important

The place we live in is hugely important to all of us. The Council impacts on a daily basis on anyone who lives in or who is waiting for a Council house or affordable accommodation. People want good quality Council housing or affordable accommodation and want to know how the “housing system” works.

What we will do in response

- ☺ distribute to all tenants (and regularly update) our Tenant Handbook which:
 - outlines the conditions for tenancy of a Council house
 - summarises responsibilities and arrangements for maintenance and repairs
 - explains the rents and points/allocation systems
 - shows how tenants can help the Council and themselves
 - provides other housing-related information and advice
 - lists useful contact numbers

- ☺ continue to make available on the Council website and to anyone who asks for it, a copy of the Council's Scheme of Letting Priorities (the points/allocation system)

- ☺ contact everyone on the waiting list once a year to:
 - reaffirm their points levels
 - give them a sense of current demand and likely waiting times for Council houses
 - outline other housing options that may be available
 - ask them to confirm that they're still interested in Council housing

- ☺ formally reassess the needs and circumstances of everyone on the waiting list once every three years

- ☺ continue to use tenant feedback to inform the design and layout of new Council housing

- ☺ employ a Tenant Liaison Officer who will focus on estate management and work to meet tenants' needs
- ☺ continue to categorise and respond to repair requests as emergency, urgent or routine
- ☺ continue to work to our agreed Council housing planned maintenance/upgrading programme
- ☺ publish on a yearly basis and on the basis of set national service indicators:
 - how long it takes us to re-let empty houses
 - how many valid repair requests we actually respond to/complete
 - how long it takes us to respond to applications for housing loans (including shared ownership) , and Council housing.

What we're also looking at

- ☺ developing a comprehensive anti-social behaviour policy which builds on that outlined in the Council's Tenant Handbook
- ☺ putting in place a tenants' self-help repairs option where tenants could be paid or otherwise compensated for carrying out approved repairs to agreed standards
- ☺ examining initiatives where the Council and local residents can work together in estate clean-up programmes.

3 Children

Why this is important

Everyone cherishes their children and is protective of them. People want the risks to the safety of their children absolutely minimised and for them to have attractive leisure and recreational opportunities.

What we will do in response

- ☺ continue to organise Comhairle na nOg on an annual basis so that we can listen directly to our children and involve them in our civic and democratic processes
- ☺ continue to meet national standards in terms of our street/public lighting.
- ☺ include traffic calming and high quality street/public lighting in all new Council estates
- ☺ continue, as resources become available, with our programme of providing playgrounds around the County
- ☺ proceed to upgrade the swimming pool/sports complexes in Portlaoise and Portarlinton as soon as we get government approval
- ☺ publish on the basis of set national service indicators:
 - local levels of involvement in Comhairle na nOg
 - the number of children's playgrounds available in Laois
 - details of the usage of the swimming pools in Ballinakill, Portarlinton and Portlaoise

What we're also looking at

- ☺ making the best use of our role as the local Planning Authority to ensure play/recreation facilities are provided as part of new developments
- ☺ the provision of multi-use or shared use spaces in new developments
- ☺ working with local groups to improve traffic calming in existing estates
- ☺ how we might make greater use of Local Authority and other buildings/resources to provide activities for our young people
- ☺ developing, with others, a programme focusing on the care and management of horses

4 Environment

Why this is important

People are very aware of the importance and fragility of the places they live in. They want those places, and Laois overall, to look well and to help make us all feel good.

What we will do in response

- ☺ continue to:
 - accept bulky household refuse items at the Council's landfill site at Kyletelisha, Portlaoise: some items are accepted free whilst there is a nominal charge in respect of others

- provide “bring banks” across the County and increase the number of these over time
 - deliver a dog control service across the County
 - provide a County-wide Litter Warden service
 - maintain a Waste Enforcement Team doing spot checks and other work to prevent fly-tipping and illegal waste disposal
 - provide a freephone “litter hotline” for members of the public to report illegal incidents and other concerns
- 😊 work with local groups and communities to support flower-planting, floral displays, and tidy towns-type initiatives
 - 😊 further develop and promote a “Clean Up Laois Week”
 - 😊 publish, on a yearly basis, and on the basis of set national service indicators:
 - details of river and environmental pollution in Laois
 - details of drinking water quality in Laois
 - details of waste recycling and litter prevention measures in Laois.

5 Travellers

Why this is important

Travellers are an integral part of the Laois community. They are therefore Council customers like anyone else but also need to have their unique cultural and lifestyle traditions recognised and respected. In turn, Travellers need to respect the culture and lifestyles of others.

What we will do in response

- ☺ continue to work positively with the Laois Traveller Accommodation Committee
- ☺ continue to implement the agreed Travellers' Accommodation Programme
- ☺ publish, on a yearly basis, details of how we're doing against the targets set in the Programme.

6 Cultural Activities

Why this is important

Council services such as the Arts Office and the Library Service contribute significantly to the quality of life in Laois. Not only have they value in themselves but they also help with regeneration, social inclusion, and the coming together of people and communities across the County. People are keen that these Council services provide "something for everyone".

What we'll do in response

- ☺ continue with a County-wide Arts Strategy which includes:
 - schools-based activities using artists-in-residence
 - outreach work in "non-traditional" settings
 - low cost youth theatre activities in the County's main towns
 - community-based activities such as drama
 - projects/initiatives for ethnic minorities
 - use Laois TRIP rural transport to help rural people access facilities such as Dunamaise Theatre and the cinema

- ☺ provide some “beginner’s English” and foreign language (initially French and Spanish) materials within the Council Library
- ☺ maintain the Council’s Irish Language officer post
- ☺ respond to the requirements of the Official Languages Act 2003
- ☺ provide support via a scholarship scheme for Council employees to improve their Irish
- ☺ publish on a yearly basis and on the basis of set national service indicators, details of Library opening hours, membership and usage.

If Things Go Wrong

We know we won’t always get everything right for everybody. Sometimes things will go wrong.

We firmly believe that the more we and you work in partnership and communicate with each other, then the less things will go wrong. Whether it’s a complaint, a comment, a suggestion, or even a compliment or “thank you”, we want to hear it. That’s why we expect you to take part in any consultation exercises we might put in place.

We also have a formal Council Customer Complaints System. It’s based on a simple three-stage procedure:

Stage 1 – Discussion at the point of service

The people who can best deal with a complaint are those who provide the service. All employees will take responsibility for dealing with a complaint. Mistakes and misunderstandings are usually sorted quickly and efficiently. Customers will be notified of the identity of the employee responsible for dealing with their complaint.

Stage 2 – Who to contact

If you are unhappy with the outcome of Stage 1, you can contact the Designated Contact Person in writing or by making an appointment and he/she will fully investigate the matter. The Contact Persons are listed on the insert sheet on the back cover of this Charter.

Stage 3 – Internal Appeal Procedure

If you are still dissatisfied with the decision or response, you may pursue the matter with the Senior Executive Officer in the Corporate Affairs Department who will have the matter fully and impartially investigated. Your complaint will be acknowledged within five working days, treated confidentially and a decision or update will be given within four weeks. Complaints should, if possible, be made in writing on the prescribed FREEPOST complaint form. A copy is included in this Charter.

Sometimes there are other ways to take up a complaint and our employees will be glad to advise you on this.

Finally, you may of course want to go direct to the Office of the Ombudsman. The Office provides an independent national service responsible for investigating complaints made about Public Bodies, including Councils. Those complaints can be about actions, delays or inactions that adversely affect people. The address for contact is:

*Office of the Ombudsman
18 Lower Leeson Street
Dublin 2*

Tel: 01 6395600

Fax: 01 6395674

Lo-Call 1 890 223 030

Email: ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.ie