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Review of Laois County Development Plan 2017-2023: Pre-Draft Stage

This is the submission on behalf of the Department of Public Health, HSE Midlands in response to Laois County Council's 'Issue's Paper' in relation to their Development Plan 2021-2027.

Background

The Medical Officer of Health "*shall advise the county council generally in relation to the health of the people and the provision of health services, sanitary services and housing accommodation*" (*Health (Duties of Officers) Order, 1949 Section 1*).

A key objective of the Department of Public Health, HSE Midlands is health promotion for the population living in the Midlands region. In addition to health promotion, the Department of Public Health, Midlands have particular expertise in environment and health, and child health.

1. Access to green and recreational spaces

In line with the National Development Strategy, as we pursue urban-centred living policies, it is imperative to be aware of the importance of green leafy spaces within those environments and their positive effects on physical and mental health. The World Health Organization highlight the positive benefits associated with urban green spaces – playgrounds, parks and residential greenery – on physical and mental health (World Health Organization 2016). Developing safe green spaces in tandem with developing our neighbourhoods has the potential to reduce childhood obesity rates, reduce stress levels; reduce heart disease (Yeager Ray *et al.* 2018). Access to green space is linked to higher rates of physical exercise and increased levels of social support within communities (Dadvand *et al.* 2016) which becomes more important as the average age of our population increases. Adults and children with easy access to large green spaces are more likely to achieve recommended levels of activity than those with no access (Lee and Maheswaran 2010).

More generally, we would recommend that a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is conducted for all major developments. The European Centre for Health Policy define a HIA as “a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, programme or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population,” (World Health Organization 2020) The Gothenburg

Consensus outlines the principles of HIA. The HIA process should be open, transparent, ethical, equitable, robust methods must be used, actively engage with and involve a wide range of stakeholders, inform sustainable policies – both in the long and short term, and democratic by emphasising the rights of people to participate in major decisions that affect their lives and enable them, via the HIA process, to participate and contribute to the decision-making process (Wales HIA Support Unit 2011; Pg 7).

A HIA can be prospective – carried out at the start of the development of a project or proposal; concurrent – is carried out at the same time as the project is being implemented; or retrospective – used as an evaluation tool to assess the effect of an existing project (Wales HIA Support Unit 2011; Pg 10).

Both HIAs and Environmental Impact Assessments are crucial to understanding the impacts of housing, agricultural and transport infrastructural developments on surrounding environs with respect to public health and climate change.

2. Adequate Housing

The effects of inadequate housing are most acute among children and young adults. In January 2020 there were a total of 25 families homeless in the Midlands region, including 56 dependents under age 18 (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government 2020). The detrimental effects of homelessness on mental and physical health is especially serious in children, with potential lifelong impacts (Ombudsman for Children’s Office 2019). Children living in homelessness or in inadequate housing are more prone to poor nutrition and obesity; have higher rates of asthma and respiratory illness; they are more likely to have low birth weight and preterm pregnancy; poorer emotional and mental health and increased behavioural difficulties; lower rates of childhood immunisation; poorer educational opportunities; less access to developmental opportunities, play, recreation and

social activities; and are more likely to experience difficulties in their relationship with their parents (Faculties of Public Health Medicine and Paediatrics, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland 2019). It is therefore imperative that providing adequate housing for families be a priority of Laois County Council through the provision of affordable quality housing with secure tenancies.

3. High quality and affordable childcare provision

High quality, affordable and accessible childcare is central to the Social, Community and Recreational Strategy and to economic growth and sustainability. The National Development Plan cites ensuring quality and supply of sufficient childcare places as a priority (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform 2019), this is also included as a priority in the National Development Strategy 2018 – 2027 (Government of Ireland 2018; Pg 93). To enable families to access sufficient quality childcare, it must be affordable. As we reach full employment, childcare is one of the fundamental requirements to support women that wish to participate in the labour market to do so. International evidence shows that increased female labour force participation helps to realise the economy's full potential. It also works to decrease deprivation, leading to better population health outcomes. "Access to affordable childcare is inherently linked to creating an equitable society, sustainable communities and a thriving economy," (National Development Strategy 2018 – 2027; pg 92). Funding mechanisms for affordable childcare to support those that wish to participate in the workforce should be investigated.

When planning quality childcare facilities it is important to take into account a number of factors, mainly associated with infection control. For example, consideration should be given to the safety of the location of the childcare facility and the layout with regard to controlling infection by minimising footfall within the facility and restricting interactions between children within different rooms as much as possible. Each room should be self-sustainable with respect to eating and changing facilities, with a central kitchen located separately to the rooms where the children are cared for.

4. Infrastructure

Increase accessibility to public transport (infrastructure and frequency) to encourage change to people's travel behaviours. As key service towns are developed and expanded, consideration should be given to providing transport alternatives within those key

population hubs, to encourage a shift away from private vehicle use. This would decrease the potential for air pollution within those areas and reduce the need for large concrete parking facilities, thereby increasing the potential for development of green leafy spaces within towns. Alternatives to private car would also increase opportunities for social interaction and generate greater social capital within communities (Leyden 2003).

As part of the national drive to reduce carbon emissions and encourage more people to leave their cars at home, safe walking and cycling routes close to towns and villages in County Laois should be developed and maintained. Walking and cycling routes which encompass main hubs with schools and sports facilities so as to encourage and enable families to walk to school and sport practice and fixtures. This would complement the CleanAir@School initiative being run across the country by the EPA and the EEA which raises awareness on the impacts of road transport on air quality among school children and their parents (Environmental Protection Agency 2019). It also aligns with the '10 minute settlement concept' as suggested in the Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019-2031, whereby necessary services are accessible within ten minutes of walking or cycling.

The Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019-2031 highlights the importance of integrating land use and transport planning for the purposes of sustainable development. Incorporating walk and cycle ways into new developments is imperative to achieving sustainable development and encourages a shift away from private car use. The number of people aged 85 is projected to double in the Midlands region by 2031. Health promotion and maintenance over the life course by helping people to stay active and healthy increases the number of healthy years a person lives, which is particularly important policy given the increases predicted in numbers of our older population.

5. Safe drinking water

Ireland has the highest rate of Verotoxigenic E. Coli in Europe (European Food Safety Authority and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control 2019), a potentially fatal infectious disease, from which about one in ten children affected develop the severe complication Haemolytic Uraemic Syndrome (HUS) requiring kidney dialysis and other intensive care treatment. In 2012, this Department of Public Health found up to 82.7% of such cases in the Midlands were linked to drinking water (Kelly and Fallon 2019) including

finding the outbreak organism in the water supply. In our statutory investigations we find that private wells are rarely built in accordance with Institute of Geologists of Ireland guidelines, leaving the drinking water vulnerable to contamination. Much of County Laois has significant groundwater vulnerability (Geological Survey Ireland 2020) and so planning decisions need to take these matters, and other risks for VTEC (also called STEC), Cryptosporidiosis and other zoonoses, into account when providing planning permission to houses and other developments that will be developing their own water supply.

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