



MINUTES OF MEETING

Project Name	Strategic Policy Committee Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism	
Purpose of Meeting	Agenda Attached	
Location of Meeting	LEO Training Room	Date and Time
		11.00 am 1 st June 2023
Present	Name	Representing
	Cllr. Conor Bergin Cllr Seamus McDonald Pat Hennessy Caroline Hofman (CH) Julie Bergin (JB), Financial/Management Accountant, Finance Brenda Earl (BE), A/Administrative Officer BSU Elaine Moore (EM), Administrative Officer	Chairperson SPC Member LCC Agriculture/Farming Rep Business/Commercial Rep LCC LCC LCC
In attendance	Sheila Cahill (SC), Staff Officer BSU	LCC (Minute Taker)
Apologies	Deirdre O'Connell-Hopkins (DH) Cllr. Aidan Mullins Pat Culleton Mark Clancy (MC), Acting Head of Enterprise, LEO Gerry Murphy (GM), Head of Finance	Trade Union Rep Member LCC Dev/Construction Rep LCC LCC

Item No.	Description	Action By	Date for Completion
1.	<p>Confirmation of Minutes</p> <p>Minutes of meeting of 2nd March 2023 were proposed by Cllr Seamus McDonald and seconded by Pat Hennessy.</p>		
2.	<p>BSU Update</p> <p>Brenda Earl (BE) provided an update regarding the current projects being carried out by the Business Support Unit (BSU) (Attached).</p>		
3.	<p>LEO Update</p> <p>Brenda Earl (BE) provided an update on behalf of Mark Clancy (MC) on the works being carried out by the Local Enterprise Office at present.</p> <p>Cllr Conor Bergin thanked Brenda for the updates on BSU & LEO and noted that Ballykilcavan Brewery are representing Laois at the National Enterprise Awards in Dublin.</p>		
4.	<p>Tourism Update</p> <p>Elaine Moore (EM) provided an update regarding the current projects being carried out by the Tourism Section. (Attached).</p> <p>Cllr Conor Bergin & Cllr Seamus McDonald expressed their gladness about the car parks at Glenbarrow & Rock of Dunamaise.</p> <p>Pat Hennessy queried the issue with some farmers along the Blueway. EM advised that there was an issue with regards to fencing which has since been resolved.</p>		

<p>5.</p>	<p>Laois Chamber Alliance Update</p> <p>Caroline Hofman (CH) provided an update on the current projects being carried out by the Laois Chamber Alliance (Attached).</p> <p>Cllr Conor Bergin thanked Caroline for the update and on the great work being done with alliance with Laois Tourism and The Cube opening. New Strategy extended to 2025.</p>		
<p>6.</p>	<p>The Cube Building Update</p> <p>Caroline Hofman (CH) provided an update on The Cube (Attached).</p>		
<p>7.</p>	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>This concluded the business of the meeting.</p> <p>Next meeting – 7th September 2023 at 11am in the Council Chamber</p>		

Agenda

Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism Strategic Policy Committee

Thursday 1st June 2023

- 1. Confirmation of minutes of meeting held on the 2nd March 2023**
- 2. Business Support Unit Update – Brenda Earl**
- 3. LEO Update – Mark Clancy**
- 4. Tourism Update – Elaine Moore**
- 5. Update from Laois Chamber Alliance - Caroline Hofman**
- 6. Update re Cube Building – Caroline Hofman**
- 7. Any other business**

BUSINESS SUPPORT UNIT UPDATE

1. Shop-front Improvement & Accessibility Grant Scheme

This scheme is available again for 2023. A budget of €10,000 has been allocated for the scheme and it is open to businesses in all Town's/Village's Centres in the County. The BSU has made an online application facility available as well as hard copy application option. There are 13 applications being processed at present, 8 of which were approved in 2022 however an extension was given to these applicants to allow them to be processed under the 2023 scheme to allow sufficient time to carry out the works.

2. Business Incentive Schemes & Early payment Incentive Scheme

This scheme is available to businesses who open up a new business in premises which have been vacant for 6 months or more. It gives businesses a three year reduction on their rates. This Scheme has been extended to Ballylinan & Ballinakill. We are currently looking at extending it to Killenard. 3 applications received to date this year.

3. Town and Village Streetscape Enhancement Scheme 2022

€100,000 has been allocated to Abbeyleix in respect of this scheme.

The scheme aims to encourage:

- Strategic collaboration between property owners to paint buildings and/or shopfronts in vibrant colours
- Upgrade or restoration of historic / traditional shopfronts
- Provision of street planting, shrubbery, trees and flowers boxes
- Installation of canopies
- Murals/public artwork

€8,000 maximum funding per building. 80% max funding per application. 52 applications received; 32 applications approved. Completion date for the works is 31st August 2023.

4. Portlaoise Town Team

The BSU are working closely with a sub-committee of the Portlaoise Town Team which comprises of representatives from the business group Downtown Portlaoise.

Work has commenced on a project entitled "Marketing Portlaoise Online" . Funding for this project is coming from Laois Partnership and Laois County Council. Working with a social media company to market Portlaoise as a place to live work and visit.

New lamp post banners are being erected on the Main Street these will be in place after 1st June 2023. New signage on the approach is in place.

5. Tourism Destination Town Project- Portlaoise

The BSU continue to work with Elaine Moore, Tourism Officer, on advancing aspects of this scheme, in particular the provision of interpretative and wayfinding signage around the laneways in Portlaoise and in the Old Fort Quarter.

The Tender for Manufacture and installation of lamppost banners at the Old Fort area has issued with a closing date of 6th June 2023.

6. Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme

This Scheme was initially launched as a pilot scheme in Portlaoise in collaboration with Laois Chamber in March 2022. The aim of the scheme is to reduce vacancy and dereliction in the town centre by offering a package of incentives to businesses who rent/lease an empty building which has been vacant for 6 months or more. 54 vacant buildings have been identified in Portlaoise Town Centre. There was a lot of interest in the scheme and several new businesses have opened in Portlaoise as a direct result of the scheme. This scheme has been extended to Portarlington. The official launch of the scheme in Portarlington took place on 9th May 2023. It is envisaged it will be extended to other towns in the County in due course.

7. Laois TASTE group

The BSU are working with Laois Taste again in 2023 to promote Laois as a food and drinks destination. Laois Taste will be present at local events such as Electric Picnic and the National Ploughing Championships.

8. Town and Village Scheme Killeshin

The BSU are working with Killeshin Community Group on the extension of the Community Centre and remote working hub in Killeshin. The sum of €500,000 was received from the Department with the project cost totaling €691,628.73. Contracts were signed in April 2023, due to H&S requirements, and Commencement Notices works are due to commence 19th June 2023.

9. Town and Village Scheme- Digital Hubs

The BSU will be working with the digital hubs in 2023 on a marketing campaign to attract remote workers to the hubs in Laois. The sum of €50,000 was received for this project. Work is on-going and a Tender Document is currently being drafted.

LOCAL ENTERPRISE OFFICE UPDATE

- 5 trading online voucher applications approved
- 29 business set up to avail of 1-1 mentoring
- 8 Training course were delivered to a total of 69 participants
- 4 additional companies signed up for the Green for Micro programme

- 2 business were signed up for the Digital Start Programme
- 2 new Laois businesses were assisted to access Micro Finance Ireland (NFI) loan funding.
- 3 students finalists from Heywood and Portlaoise College were supported and assisted with preparations to go forward to represent Laois at the National Student Enterprise Finals which were held in Croke Park on 5th May. Heywood Student Daniel Aylward, Donil Mathew and Evan Farrell from Heywood Community School won 3rd overall in the Senior Category for their bicycle hurley holder product hurlr.
- David Walsh Kemmis will be representing Laois at the National Enterprise Awards in the Mansion House in Dublin tonight.

TOURISM UPDATE

Tourism Grants

€48,200 has been approved to date under the Tourism Grant Scheme 2023. Events supported include a number of St. Patricks Day Festivals, music, sporting, heritage, family, agricultural shows and events.

Barrow Blue Way:

As previously advised the Laois section is complete except for road crossings. The road crossing in Vicarstown has been modified to the satisfaction of the local community and the Blueway Project. A meeting was attended by Waterways Ireland, Blueway RE and Local residents regarding same. All construction is now complete except for a tarmacadam surface and gates. The bike stand area has been relocated adjacent to the canal rather than adjacent to the road as initially located. This will be installed in due course. The Placemaking Plan has been finalised and meetings have been held with various stakeholders. There will be an official launch at the end of 2023.

Glenbarrow Carpark

The lease with the landowner has been signed. Hinch Plant Hire will commence the works next Tuesday 6th June. Groundwork is expected to take 3 to 4 weeks.

Parking at The Rock of Dunamase

A Part VIII for the development of parking facilities was put on public display, this ended on May 9th. A public consultation took place in County Hall with residents from the area. It is intended to take the Part VIII before the Elected Members at the June Council Meeting.

Timahoe Heritage Centre:

All works have been completed. Laois County Council staff met with the Architect and Contractor on site yesterday and are awaiting the electrical certificate from the main contractor and the associated issue of the Certificate of Substantial Completion. The building has been handed back to the Community.

S.P.C. Sub Committee - Promotional Tourism Brochure

A meeting of the Promotional Tourism Brochure sub-committee was held on Thursday 4th May 2023. The draft Tourism Promotional Paper was circulated and discussed. A number of items were to be removed and a number of further inclusions were to be made. This paper will include a QR code which will link to a specific section on the Laois Tourism Website. The Draft Promotional Tourism Brochure will be brought before the September meeting of the SPC. If any member wishes to include any item, please contact Ms E Moore.

Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail

Planning permission was granted in February 2023 for a new single storey National Mountain Bike Trail Head Building consisting of a café, bike hire facility, toilets and ancillary spaces at Baunreagh, Mountrath. The Final Grant of Planning has been issued and work is ongoing on:

- **Detailed Design Information & Costings**
- **Tendering Process** – it is hoped to award the Contract for construction at the beginning of August.
- **Planning Conditions Information**
- **Enabling Works** – demolition of the existing structure on site and other works including NPWS consultation

Construction of the trailhead building is expected to start in September with completion by June 2024.

The construction of the final 6k of trails has now been delayed until September and will be completed before the end of 2023. This is due to a number of factors including Environmental – Hen Harrier nesting season expires at end of August and the risk of endangering same; Contractor Availability - contractors were delayed at other trailhead locations, and, to ensure competitive bids/value for money was received.

The Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Festival took place from Sat 29th – Sun 30th April and attracted an attendance of approximately 400 participants from beginners to experts. Feedback was very positive from all mountain bikers and the local community.

Ras na mBan

Stage 3 of Ras na mBan will be held in Laois on the 8th September 2023. The stage will commence with a ceremonial start from Aras An Chontae at 11am passing through Stradbally, The Heath, Emo, Mountmellick, Clonaslee, The Cut, Mountrath, Ballacolla, Abbeyleix with the stage finishing in Mountrath town. An official launch will be held in July in Mountrath.

UPDATE – LAOIS CHAMBER ALLIANCE

Events

International Women’s Day Lunch

International Women’s Day Lunch in collaboration with Local Enterprise Office Laois in the Midlands Park Hotel; approximately 55 people in attendance, with guest speaker Dr Diane Cooper and Ruth Kavanagh.

Shine in Emo 2023

Over 100 exhibitors on the day, representing business, sport, tourism, crafts and food. A great turn out with 5,000 visitors on the day. The OPW also kindly opened Emo Court House to the public on the day, with 2,000 visitors visiting the house. A big thank you to Local Enterprise Office Laois, Laois Partnership and the LEADER programme, our sponsors, and our exhibitors for making this event happen.

24 sporting teams took place in the main event, with the overall winners Ballinteer St Johns GAA. RTÉ Nationwide were filming throughout the day, and this episode should be aired in the coming weeks.

Shine in Emo 2022 is a finalist in the *Event of the Year* category at the Chambers Ireland Awards, taking place in the Killashee Hotel Naas later today.

Lunch and Learn Events

Most recent event took place on 26th April in collaboration with LEO Laois. Next event to be held on 15th June with Dr. Diane Cooper as our guest speaker talking about workplace wellbeing – The title for this lunch and learn is **SELF Care for Entrepreneurs - How to Care for a Strong Mind, Body and Business**. Bookings can be made through the Local Enterprise Office Laois website; this is a free event. Thank you to LEO Laois for collaborating with us to deliver this extremely popular events.

2023 Laois Business Awards

Decision made to postpone until 2024, and run the event every two years.

Initiatives and Updates

- A new destination marketing company for Laois Tourism has been awarded the contract through the eTenders process, commencing the end of June 2023. We are looking forward to working with this new company.
- Deric Hartigan visited Treacy’s Bar and Restaurant, The Heath, on Tuesday 30th May to promote the upcoming Gordon Bennett Irish Classic Car Run. This was a great promotional opportunity on Ireland AM, with really positive feedback on the coverage.
- Excellent coverage with Midlands 103 on Europe Day, which took place on 9th May. A really good opportunity to promote Europe Direct and to highlight funding opportunities to businesses from EU programmes.
- The Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme, initially piloted in Portlaoise, has been rolled out to Portarlington in collaboration with Laois County Council and Offaly County Council. It was

officially launched on Tuesday, 9th May. Laois Chamber Alliance is engaging with auctioneers and property owners in Portarlinton town to ensure any eligible vacant premises have this poster prominently displayed.

Posters for the existing scheme in Portlaoise continue to be put up in vacant premises' windows when permission is received from property owners/auctioneers.

Concerns and Challenges

- Staffing issues and energy costs continue to be top of the agenda in terms of difficulties faced by businesses across all sectors.
- Shortage of housing availability in Laois also impacting staff relocating here, but this is a national issue.

Invest in Laois

We continue to follow up any queries from start ups and established businesses looking to set up in Laois. IKEA will be opening their Portlaoise store in the coming months and we also received an enquiry from a company in the solar industry.

UPDATE – THE CUBE BUILDING

Official Opening

The CUBE Low Carbon Centre was officially opened on 30th March 2023, by Minister Simon Coveney TD. This was a well attended opening, with over 50 people in attendance. Minister Dara Calleary subsequently visited The CUBE in late April. Both Ministers were very impressed with the facility.

The Building and Tenants

We are now at full occupancy. The Just Transition Team of Midlands Ireland and Midlands Hubs are located on the ground floor, with plans for further tenants in the low carbon area to move here also. FRS Recruitment and WrkWrk are located on the first floor, with Demand Science located on the top floor.

Some external signage was put on the building prior to our official opening. This makes the premises easily identifiable. We will soon have external signage displaying our tenants logos also.

We have a state of the art training room on the ground floor which can seat up to 30 people. A number of events have already taken place here, in relation to biodiversity and also Just Transition funding. The space is open for rental to educational providers, community groups, and businesses.

Initiatives

- The CUBE is developing a partnership with the SPEEDIER programme, which was piloted in Ballykilcavan Farm and Brewery. This is an SME programme providing a one-stop-shop solution that applies an integrated approach to energy management, providing information, advice, capacity building, energy auditing, financing, implementation of energy efficiency solutions and monitoring of impacts.
- A Memorandum of Understanding has been signed as part of an EU-wide €20 million Horizon 2020 project, assisting the agri-food sector in digitalisation. We will be one of five innovation centres in Ireland (one of 9 regional clusters) who have signed this MoU, with over 300 digital innovation hubs across Europe part of this project. Further details on this will be shared shortly.

- Plans are well underway to become part of the Innovation Exchange, a Skillnet supported initiative. We will be the only innovation centre offering this in the Midlands Region; there is already a presence in Galway Technology Centre and RDI Hub in Kerry. The Innovation Exchange is where businesses facing digital transformation challenges are connected with innovative solutions providers with the talent to help them achieve their ambitions. Large corporates get access to Ireland's most talented solutions providers and to collaborations that accelerate digital transformation. Scaling technology companies get an instant sales pipeline as well as access to key decision makers, market intelligence and the capability to sell to large corporates.
- We have a partnership with Carbon Action to deliver low carbon training to businesses of all scales and sizes. Carbon Action is a leading provider of Carbon consultancy services and Carbon Training Courses in the UK and Ireland, delivering training in carbon quantification, verification and management of carbon projects that conforms with the global standard – ISO 14064 and the GHG protocol.
- Discussions underway with the LOETB and Skillnet to deliver green and sustainability training tailored for businesses.
- Discussions with SEAI to have a community element in The CUBE, where the general public can attend advice clinics and get information how to retrofit and become more energy efficient in their homes.
- Meeting with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine regarding Bioeconomy and the opportunities for the agrifood sector in the Midlands region.
- Possible collaboration with a third level institution to work with Erasmus Masters and Post-Doctoral students to research the development of Ecotourism in Laois and the wider Midlands region.

Upcoming ...

- We will be exhibiting at the RUN-EU Circular Economy Event in TUS Athlone, taking place on June 19th and 20th. This event looks at addressing European Society's Sustainability issues through collaborative engagement of Academia, Enterprise, Society and Government.
- Invitation to Brussels to meet with policy makers in the area of energy policy. I would very much welcome any discussions on areas people would be interested in me bringing up and exploring at these discussions.