

**LAOIS HERITAGE AND BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY 2021 - 2026**

**FINAL TEXT FOR LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL**

**DECEMBER 2021**



## Introduction

The built, natural and cultural heritage of Laois is an invaluable asset which gives each town, village and community its identity and sense of place, and provides a high-quality environment for all. Similarly, each heritage site in our county is unique and has its own intrinsic qualities, inseparable from its place, its biodiversity and the cultural and societal values given to it by its community.

A variety of disciplines working together are required to fully describe, conserve and value these sites and places, and the events and stories they represent. This integrated approach is at the heart of what local authorities can do better than any other organisation in the country. Successful place-making relies on sustained and shared ambition in delivering for our architecture and our landscapes, our flora and fauna, our people and places, our past and our future. Laois County Council is committed to bringing the full range of our expertise to bear for the heritage, biodiversity and sustainable development of Laois.

We have delivered three County Heritage Plans to date (2002 – 2006, 2007 – 2011 and 2014 – 2019). These successive plans have yielded investment in all aspects of heritage. We have helped to safeguard our thatched houses and strengthen our townscapes. We have enriched the understanding of our geology, our histories and our place names. We have supported our communities and our culture from the restoration of graveyards and investment in monuments and heritage sites, to the stories of Laois we continue to share. We have supported the local economy through audio guides, heritage trails and heritage events. We have championed biodiversity, from mapping habitats and species to the development of local biodiversity action plans through to the online success of our guide on ‘Gardening for Biodiversity’.

The layered nature of the local authority’s approach is evident across our heritage projects and programmes, be they large-scale or locally focussed. By way of example, our work with communities in conserving and revealing the heritage in our graveyards highlights the potential for integration which we will champion through the 2021 – 2026 Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy.

Graveyards are home to:

- Architecture – churches, walls, entrances, memorials;
- Archaeology – burials, medieval remains, early Christian or later medieval sites;
- Biodiversity – with vegetation that is often untouched by modern agricultural methods (no artificial fertilisers, no ploughing, no ground disturbance) supporting a range of wildlife. Some graveyards even contain plants brought to Ireland by early Christian monks as food or herbal remedies;
- Folklore – stories of early Irish saints, holy wells, pattern days, and cures such as headache stones or wart stones;
- Genealogy – family histories carved into headstones;
- Placenames – details of how place names evolved on older headstones and memorials
- Sensitive histories – whether histories of those who died in conflicts, or burials of babies or deaths by suicide outside graveyard walls.

Many early graveyards also carry the foundation story of the local settlement, are central to the local history of a parish and are places of enormous value to the communities that live around them

A specialist might enter a graveyard and focus on the aspect of heritage that relates to their own area of expertise. Such expert knowledge is important in guiding Laois County Council in relation to best practice. Local communities tend to value all aspects of the heritage and biodiversity of these places equally and collectively and, as a local authority, Laois County Council also seeks to take a place-based approach; integrating our heritage work across built, natural and cultural heritage, where possible.

Adopting integrated approaches also helps to surface policy conflicts that are part and parcel of sensitive heritage work. For example, ivy which is valuable for biodiversity, can cause significant damage to masonry walls.

Resolving these tensions is often a matter of planning and timing, and achieving the appropriate balance in such situation is central to how communities are engaged with heritage places.

For Laois, our biodiversity, ecosystems and landscapes have been particularly important to the integrated approach of our heritage service since its establishment, and this continuing commitment of the Laois Heritage Programme to biodiversity is reflected in the expanded title of the 2021 – 2026 strategy.

This Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy sets out to provide a common framework through which appropriate agencies, organisations and other stakeholders can work together with Laois County Council and the people and communities across Laois in conserving, enhancing, celebrating and commemorating our county's heritage.

## **Framing our Approach**

Much has changed since the adoption of the first heritage plan for Laois and through the investment of the Local Authority, in partnership with the Heritage Council and other local and national partners, the importance of heritage and biodiversity are well established across the local authority and within the wider community.

Previous County Heritage Plans have been largely action focussed. While this approach was appropriate to those plans, changing environmental, policy and investment drivers mean that a more strategic approach is now required.

Our heritage programmes have been to the fore on biodiversity projects for almost 20 years and initiatives such as Portlaoise's 'Low Carbon Town Centre' have seen the strengthening of green corridors in our county town. Laois County Council is well placed to lead on biodiversity, but the deepening climate crisis and global biodiversity collapse emphasise the urgent need for our work in this area to be scaled up. The threat of climate change and the need to promote sustainability is hugely important. Climate action has become fundamental to all our work and will drive many local and national initiatives in the coming years. Engagement and collaboration with communities will be essential to delivering effective climate action.

There is increasing recognition of the value and potential of Ireland's towns and villages. This has led to more targeted initiatives where built, natural and cultural heritage have a role to play in delivering on the physical renewal, and also in mobilising the social capital that underpins the success of local regeneration initiatives.

The long-term societal impacts and learnings from Covid-19 remain uncertain. The experience of the pandemic has, however, encouraged and enabled people to connect with the heritage and environment of their locale in both new and renewed ways, and such increased engagement is an opportunity on which this Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy can build.

This evolving context calls for a more dynamic and integrated approach to delivery of our work. Aspects of our heritage and biodiversity are fragile and we need to act with urgency and purpose to safeguard our built, natural and cultural heritage assets – for current and future generations. This calls for a strategic approach which can be both responsible and responsive.

This draft strategy therefore provides a cohesive framework which will guide Annual Action Plans to be devised, implemented, and published each year based on the aims and objectives of this Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy. This approach will afford the Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy the agility required to support the local authority, local communities, and other partners to achieve the best outcomes for heritage and biodiversity, which can in turn support and drive ongoing work in wellbeing, regeneration, tourism and broader community and economic development.

Finally, it is important to build on the achievements of successive heritage plans from 2002, which have seen significant development in the capacity and ambition within heritage groups, biodiversity groups and other community groups at local level, creating a readiness for a more holistic approach. Our heritage is there to be experienced and enjoyed as part of everyday life by everyone in the community, and this plan also seeks to place communities and collaboration at the heart of heritage and biodiversity.

## Planning for Heritage and Biodiversity in Laois

The Laois County Council Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy is the Local Authority's statement of intent in relation to the heritage and biodiversity of Laois. The development and delivery of this strategy is centred on supporting the Local Authority's vision, 'that Laois is an excellent place to live in, to work in, to invest in and to visit – for now and for the future'.

The values of Laois County Council also underpin our approach. These values include a commitment to sustainability, which ensures that the Council 'works in ways which accord with the principle of sustainability, facilitate economic progress and social cohesion, and enhance and safe-guard the natural and built environment' of Laois.

The values, outlined in Laois County Council's Corporate Plan also highlight the Local Authority's commitment to partnership 'with private sector, state agencies, community groups, the wider community and our workforce'. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that the success of heritage programmes undertaken in Laois to date is due to the contribution of many of these stakeholders and, in particular, to the contribution of the Laois Heritage Forum which has also been instrumental in the development of this Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy. The current membership of the Laois Heritage Forum is set out at Annex 1 and, in line with appropriate governance and succession processes, the membership of the Laois Heritage Forum will be reviewed in the first year of the new Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy.

The integrated process of developing the strategy reflects our ambition for implementation. In this regard, coordination will remain the responsibility of the Laois County Council Heritage Office, but delivery will involve collaboration across the local authority, partnership-working and support for important heritage initiatives led by others. The Laois Heritage Forum will play a central role in guiding delivery of the strategy, and the important role of the forum will be promoted through its implementation.

The implementation and monitoring framework is set out at Fig 1.

The process of preparing this strategy commenced in 2020 with a public call for submissions in relation to the development of heritage and biodiversity in Laois.

Almost 200 responses were received to this call and this public input has been instrumental in shaping this strategy as the responses offered clear guidance in relation to key issues, including: The value of an holistic approach which integrates natural, built and cultural heritage with biodiversity. There was almost equal interest from respondents in the areas of: archaeology, oral histories and traditions, architecture, landscapes, gardens and parks and waterways, with museums and artefacts only slightly behind these areas;

Strong interest in engaging events and initiatives; guided tours, living heritage, hands-on workshops, nature walks and seminars on architecture and archaeology and nature walks; That this 2021 -2026 plan should place a strong emphasis on engaging and empowering communities to be involved in local heritage and The vast majority of respondents are not currently involved in practical projects to protect and enhance the heritage of Laois, suggesting room for growth. The Laois Heritage Forum considered the feedback and insights from the call for public submissions in the first of two workshops that took place over the Summer of 2021. The first workshop additionally considered the strengths of the heritage and biodiversity assets Laois has to offer, what has worked well to date, and the ways in which users and partners engage with

heritage and biodiversity in Laois; specifically recreational users and tourists, community groups and county and inter-agency partners.

The second workshop focused on shaping a draft Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy for Laois, framing key objectives and considering priority areas. The emerging framework was shared with the Laois Heritage Forum for further reflection and feedback. Based on these inputs, the draft plan was prepared by Laois County Council.

Following publication of the Draft Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy (October 11, 2021) a total of 12 submissions were received. These submissions were reviewed by the Laois Heritage Forum (November 22, 2021) and updates to the draft strategy agreed for recommendation to Laois County Council.

The final strategy will be subject to Appropriate Assessment, under the EU Habitats Directive, prior to implementation.

## Policy Context

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the goals. Strengthening the heritage and biodiversity of Laois can help to deliver across the SDGs, but it is particularly relevant to nine Sustainable Development Goals, shown below.

Ireland's Programme for Government 'Our Shared Future' makes significant commitments to Ireland's national heritage and biodiversity. These commitments include continued support for heritage officers in the areas of heritage education, health and wellbeing and citizen science and strengthening the number of biodiversity and conservation officers within local authorities.

At a National level, the Government is also bringing forward Heritage Ireland 2030 as a revitalised National Heritage Plan. The public consultation briefing on the plan notes that 'our natural landscapes, wildlife, national parks and reserves, our waterways and seas enrich our lives and bring visitors to our shores (and) our historic buildings, monuments and towns and landscapes speak of our past and shape our future'. The briefing also notes how Heritage Ireland 2030 will build on other policy initiatives including the National Biodiversity Action Plan, the National Landscape and Peatland Strategies, Heritage Council Strategy, Climate Change Adaptation and Architectural and Archaeological policies.

The National Biodiversity Action Plan 2017-2021 highlights a key role for local authorities in biodiversity conservation; through planning and environmental services and the networks of heritage, biodiversity, community and water officers. The plan requires local authorities to review and update their biodiversity and heritage plans, and development plans and policies to underpin the protection and restoration of biodiversity. The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2021 - 2025 seeks to strengthen pollinator friendly management of public parks and green spaces, integrate the Pollinator Plan into future county/city development or biodiversity plans, and raise awareness of pollinators and existing initiatives at local authority level.

The Heritage Council Strategy 2018 – 2022, 'Heritage at the Heart', seeks to support the local authority Heritage Officer Network and assess how the range of local heritage services can be expanded to maximise the leadership role of local authorities. The strategy also seeks to assist in improving the housing situation by developing strategies with local authorities that deal with unused historic buildings, and work with central and local government and local communities to examine the access and indemnity issues associated with places of special cultural or natural interest.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 establishes the legislative basis for Ireland to become a climate resilient, biodiversity rich and climate neutral economy by 2050. The National Climate Change Adaptation Framework also places an emphasis on the vulnerability of climate sensitive sectors and, in this regard, Ireland has Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plans in place for both Built and Archaeological Heritage and for Biodiversity, each of which identify challenges and opportunities which will inform the implementation of the Laois Climate Change Adaptation Strategy 2019 – 2024.

The Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy has also been informed by Project Ireland 2040 and the National Development Plan, the National Peatlands Strategy 2015, the National Landscape Strategy 2015 – 2025, Government Policy on Architecture, Framework and Principles for the Protection of Archaeological Heritage, and the Creative Ireland Programme.

The iterative and developmental nature in which the Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy is delivered through Annual Action Plans will also see implementation informed by evolving National policy (e.g., the forthcoming Heritage Ireland 2030 and the future iteration of 2017 - 2021 National Biodiversity Action Plan) as well as at European and local authority levels.

## **Strategic Aims and Objectives**

The aims of the Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy 2021-2026 are to:

- a) Conserve and enhance the heritage and biodiversity of Laois;
- b) Commemorate the people and events of historical significance for Laois;
- c) Integrate our work across built, natural and cultural heritage, where possible; and
- d) Celebrate and promote the heritage and biodiversity of Laois. In order to deliver on our aims over the life of the strategy, we will target delivery of objectives across eight key action areas as set out below:

### 1 Research, Data Collection and Best Practice

Objective: Document Laois heritage and biodiversity and ensure that all partners have access to the data, insights and expert guidance required to inform decision-making and guide future investment.

### 2 Investment in Key Sites and Programmes

Objective: Build on investment in conservation and biodiversity undertaken to sustain and enhance key built, natural and cultural heritage assets in Laois.

### 3 Investment in People and Community-led Heritage and Biodiversity

Objective: Support the work of heritage and biodiversity champions and build the capacity of local communities to conserve, commemorate, and celebrate local heritage and strengthen pride of place.

### 4 Engagement and Education

Objective: Promote understanding, appreciation, and dialogue; cultivating a collective responsibility to safeguard the heritage and biodiversity of our county and create a sustainable future.

### 5 Policy and Advocacy

Objective: Work with key partners and policy stakeholders to strengthen their understanding of the value and potential in supporting heritage and biodiversity in Laois.

### 6 Place-making and Connecting Landscapes

Objective: Enhance the integrated experience of heritage and biodiversity at visited sites, and the connections between heritage places across Laois and further afield, to strengthen our sense of place and reveal our storied landscapes.

### 7 Championing Laois

Objective: Target important heritage and biodiversity milestones, connections, stories or developments to raise national/international awareness and appreciation of our county.

### 8 Targeting Resources

Objective: Scope key resource requirements and target investment from local and national sources for delivery of this plan.

## **Delivery through Annual Action Plans**

Collectively, the eight objectives of the Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy provide an enabling framework, which seeks to ensure that the aims of conserving, commemorating, integrating and celebrating Laois heritage and biodiversity are appropriately considered when projects and programmes are in development.

This strategic framework will support the development of Annual Action Plans, as well as guiding the sustained development of projects and programmes in an integrated way. This approach is designed to ensure that Annual Action Plans are appropriately balanced in maintaining a strategic focus and delivering on the overall aims and objectives, while also ensuring that Laois can respond to opportunities and priorities as they arise.

The 2021 – 2026 Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy builds on the work of previous plans. While this strategy reflects a refined approach that can be both responsible and responsive, projects and programmes that make up Annual Action Plans will sustain important work undertaken to date.

The eight objectives are not mutually exclusive, and projects and programmes will deliver against a number of objectives. In this way, the collective and combined actions of Annual Action Plans will consistently deliver against the aims and objectives of the 2021 – 2026 Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy.

Building on the success for previous Laois Heritage Plans and programmes, delivery of Annual Action Plans will be resourced by a range of partners, including: Laois County Council; The Heritage Council; Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government, specifically: National Monuments Service and National Parks and Wildlife Service, and Urban Regeneration and Development Funding; Department of Rural and Community Development, specifically Town and Village Renewal Schemes and Rural Regeneration and Development Funding; the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications through Just Transition Funding; and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, the Gaeltacht, Sport and the Media, specifically: the Decade of Commemorations and the Creative Ireland Programme.

The Annual Action Plans will be published in each year and will form the basis for annual monitoring and review by Laois County Council, in partnership with Laois Heritage Forum.

## Implementation and Monitoring

The Laois Heritage & Biodiversity Strategy 2021 – 2026 is delivered in line with the Laois County Council Corporate Plan, and in partnership with the Laois Heritage Forum. Working with the Local Authority, the Laois Heritage Forum will continue to have a key role in informing Annual Action Plans and in supporting delivery.

Activities, outputs and iterative heritage programme development will be monitored through annual action plan processes. A longer-term impact-monitoring framework for the strategy will be developed within the first Annual Action Plan.

The Implementation and Monitoring Framework is illustrated below (Fig. 1), based on the first and second years of the strategy:

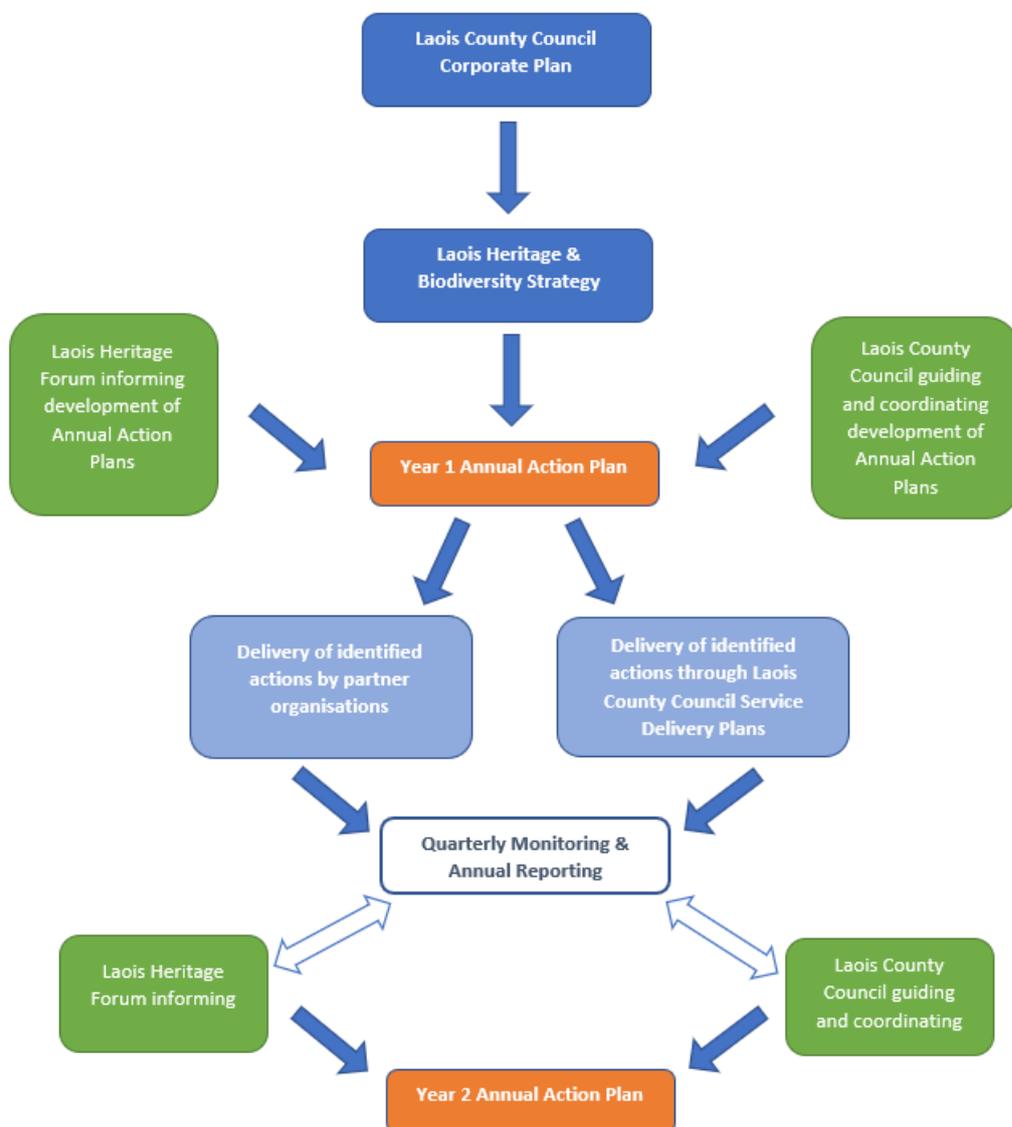


Figure 1: Implementation and monitoring framework

## **Annex1 Laois Heritage Forum**

Cllr Willie Aird (Laois County Council)  
Mr. John Bonham (Laois Tourism)  
Ms. Ann Carroll (Laois County Council Environment)  
Mr. Gerard Buckley (Coillte)  
Ms. Noreen Byrne (Laois Federation of Tidy Towns)  
Ms Martina Cripps (BirdWatch Ireland Laois Branch)  
Ms Vera Donohue (Public Participation Network: Social Inclusion Sector)  
Mr. Peter Dooley (Teagasc)  
Representative tbc (Slieve Bloom Association)  
Mr. Teddy Fennelly (Laois Heritage Society)  
Mr. John Finlay (Irish Farmers Association)  
Cllr. Pdraig Fleming (Laois County Council)  
Ms Bernie Foran (Laois County Library Service)  
Representative tbc (Laois Partnership)  
Mr. Ray Harte (Public Participation Network: Environment Sector)  
Mr Basil Mannion, Local Authorities Waters and Communities Office.  
Mr. Mark McCorry (Bord na Mona)  
Ms. Angela McEvoy (Laois County Council Planning Section)  
Mr. Sean Murray (Public Participation Network: Community & Voluntary Sector)  
Mr. Michael Parsons (The Heritage Council)  
Dr. Eoin Sullivan (Individual, seconded)  
Ms. Anne Sundermann (Irish Wildlife Trust Laois Offaly Branch)  
Mrs. Mary White (Individual, seconded)

Laois Heritage Forum would also like to pay tribute to the contributions of Anne Goodwin (Laois Partnership) and Michael Dowling (Slieve Bloom Association) who died in recent years. Anne and Michael were valued and valuable members of Laois Heritage Forum and contributed enormously to the development of the previous Laois Heritage Plan and to the conservation, commemoration and celebration of Laois heritage. Anne and Michael will be greatly missed.