

Laois Environmental Action Forum (LEAF)

County Development Plan Review Submission

Draft 02/03/2020

Executive Summary (Proposed Actions)

To ensure that the protection of the environment is integrated at every level of the council's work, it should be an **objective** of the Laois Co. Co. to:

1. Update and upskill Local Authority staff on Climate/Biodiversity actions and best practice through LA CPD training programme.
2. Set up a multi-agency and multi-stakeholder *County Climate/Biodiversity Task Force*.
3. Carryout a County Habitat/Carbon Audit Review.
4. Sign up to the *All-Ireland Pollinator Plan*.
5. Undertake a baseline study of 7.10 – 7.19 of the current CPD. This is in order to measure future changes in the environment in County Laois. This can lead to review of how effective CPD environmental policies are on the ground.
6. Create the positions of Climate Officer and Biodiversity Officer to ensure audited oversight of relevant CDP and other plans, objectives, policies, guidelines etc. and to strengthen internal and external environmental enforcement.
7. Provide a space in the CUBE offices for local environmental groups and ENGOs to meet and work (meeting room/hot-desk space) free of charge.

It should be the **policy** of Laois Co. Co. to:

1. Identify networks of wildlife corridors in County Laois as per *Wildlife Corridors* below.
2. Develop a management plan for the county's wildlife corridors.
3. Require all greenfield developments to set aside development land for biodiversity / climate action in order to off-set their impact. Details set out in *Developmental Habitat Mitigation Scheme* below.
4. Encourage the public to nominate trees for TPOs. Stands of trees are listed below that should require TPO.
5. Introduce a Sustainable Industry Schemes through relevant planning stipulations.
6. Include swift nest cavities into planning stipulations as per *Provision for Swifts* below.
7. Identify peatland areas for protection & restoration in Co. Laois.
8. Develop management plans with relevant stakeholders for each peatland area to maximise its benefit for climate action / biodiversity / flooding alleviation / tourism / education etc.
9. Measures for pollinators as set out by the *All-Ireland Pollinator Plan* should be adopted in whole by the county Heritage Plan.
10. Support relevant groups and bodies (e.g. community groups, Tidy Towns etc.) to action measures not directly actionable by the LA.
11. Follow up on planning stipulations and enforce native hedgerow re-instatement.
12. Develop and report annually on environmental indicators (e.g. enforcement of environmental planning stipulations, TPOs, implementation of env. plans, guidelines etc)

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Local Authority Activities

The Local Authority management team should endeavour to inform and upskill each LA department and staff member on Climate and Biodiversity issues through their Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme or by other mechanisms. It is paramount to the protection and enhancement of the natural environment in the county that each staff member and department are, informed, working in tandem and working towards collective goals. This is particularly urgent given the climate and biodiversity crisis we are confronted with. Qualified experts should be engaged to consult with the LA in relation to proposed developments, and the addressing of issues such as flooding, rural planning, the future use of boglands, forestry policy, the promotion of sustainable travel, and so much more. This is an essential process for all future planning activities.

Environment and Climate

New Local Authority Staff Positions

Fund and appoint two new positions within the County Council. The position of Climate Officer and Biodiversity Officer should be created immediately.

County Habitat/Carbon Mapping Audit

A desk-based review of the entire county is required to identify and quantify the habitats within the county. The review would identify ownership of lands, current management and land usage and potential for climate and biodiversity-based solutions, to aid the county's efforts in terms of climate resilience, flood defense/mitigation, biodiversity loss etc. Such a review would identify the "low-hanging fruit" in terms of lands that could easily be managed effectively with stakeholder buy-in to achieve these collective goals. Such a review should make carbon calculations and assign carbon "scores" in order to steer decisions on management options and future land use. Such a review would also aid in identifying further opportunities for the development of green infrastructure and other opportunities in terms of eco/sustainable tourism locally.

Low-Carbon County

An aspiration has been communicated by the County Manager in the recent past to make Laois one of if not the first Low-carbon counties in the country. This is very heartening to hear from the LA and something LEAF would support and get behind whole-heartedly. To do so there must be an exercise first carried out to pinpoint and remove policies within the CDP that are contradictory to any effort to make the county greener and a lower its collective carbon footprint. For example, the common practice of planting peat-rich spoils and cutaway bogs with forestry is not always as carbon neutral or negative as once considered. Trees in the right place and on the right soils can deliver a carbon negative but on peat soils this is not the case. The same can be said in the land-use options/practices in our uplands and river basins. The reclamation of land and move towards private forestry is increasing flood risk in our towns and villages lower in the river basin system (i.e. Mountmellick/Portarlington). We must make these links within the CDP in order to better manage our habitats and lands to help tackle climate and biodiversity issues and make our communities and lands more resilient in the longer term. These conflicts within the CDP and cultural practices must be weeded out in advance of any signing-off of the updated County Development Plan.

County Climate/Biodiversity Task Force

It is vital that a real effort is made at a county level to plan and carry out climate action and biodiversity conservation projects at a county level. Currently there are efforts being made across the county from within the LA, by NGOs, local groups and individuals but these efforts are in many respects local and lack a county wide vision and scale. The reliance on LA staff to carry out climate actions in an “edge of desk” fashion will not deliver the meaningful projects in an effective way and the current reliance on volunteer groups is too ill-fated.

The establishment of a County Climate Action and Biodiversity Taskforce would bring together individuals from the local authority, relevant organisations (BnM, Coillte, Teagasc etc), agencies and voluntary sector to ensure a focused effort is made to deliver the larger scale efforts required to get a handle on the climate action in the county. The group would also ensure continuity of effort going forward and bring a variety of skills and experience to the table to tackle the issues we face in county Laois.

Sustainable Industry Scheme

A scheme should be considered whereby site developers/owners must integrate sustainable energy and waste reduction measures into the proposed developments/facilities. This may be actioned through incentives for industry/operators or through planning stipulations or a combination of both. These measures might include.

- Energy creation onsite via suitable measures (solar/wind)
- Efforts to source power/materials through from sustainable suppliers/sustainable pathways.
- Demonstrate efforts to offset environmental impacts where efforts are not possible on site.

Cycle Greenways

Portlaoise is the county hub and in cycling distance of four large radial towns namely, Abbeyleix (14km), Mountrath (15km), Mountmellick (11km), and Stradbally (10km) and is transitioning to a low carbon town. In the life of this plan, cycle greenways should be designed and built from those towns to Portlaoise for workers and students as well as visitors to Laois to utilise.

This would be in line with the HSE’s policies on health and sustainable travel. It would boost mental health as is proven when exercising in the countryside. It would cut CO2 emissions from transport to align with national commitments on climate change, putting Laois at the forefront as a county in a national context. It would make road safer with less traffic and the separation of cyclists and heavy vehicles. In addition, the network of greenways would complement the efforts made to date in the Slieve Blooms, encourage more tourism and create jobs locally in bike sales, rental and repair with the increase in cyclists.

CUBE Offices – Biodiversity Based Tenants

The CUBE office redevelopment on Millbrook Rd should provide a meeting space and hot desk space for local environmental groups and ENGO staff to meet and work from. The service provided to the county by these voluntary groups and locally based professionals is great and this would be a very helpful measure to support this work.

Heritage

Bog/Peatland Restoration

Our counties peatlands present a both a unique challenge and opportunity to help tackle both the climate and biodiversity crisis we are faced with. To date little effort has been made by the relevant organisations and agencies to restore our boglands at a large scale. The bogs represent low hanging fruit in this respect and with tangible plans and buy-in we could make a massive impact at both a county and national level.

Our peatlands offer the opportunity to:

Rewet and restore for carbon storage and sequestration.

Local flood alleviation.

Protection and conservation of threatened species including Curlew and Hen Harriers.

This can be achieved by a county peatland forum chaired by the Local authority and bringing together the relevant stakeholders. This could be operated as a side working group of the County Climate/Biodiversity Task Force or made the first priority for the group.

The National Pollinator Plan

All measures and practices set out by the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan (AIPP) should be incorporated into the LAs work plans, procedures and budgets going forward. Those contracted to the LA should also follow the best practice guidelines outlined by the AIPP. Measures for pollinators as set out by the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan should be adopted in whole by the county Heritage Plan. The LA should support relevant groups and bodies to action measures not directly actionable by the LA.

Full details on the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan can be found here: <https://pollinators.ie/>

Conservation of Hedgerows

The current CDP states:

'There is an extensive network of hedgerows throughout County Laois. There will be a firm presumption against the removal of hedgerows to facilitate development including where sight lines are deficient. In cases where removal is necessary, the planting of an equivalent length of native hedgerow will be required as a condition of planning permission. 'However, in reality the aforementioned measure is not being enforced by planning inspectors and where it is the wrong (non-native) species are being planted in new hedge lines. This is especially true for one off residential sites. Hedges in agricultural lands are being removed with little evidence of replacement hedges being sown elsewhere in mitigation.

Ash Dieback; 'Mitigate against the potential impacts of Ash Dieback on our landscape, particularly within our hedgerows and woodlands, by supporting and encouraging the planting of other suitable trees on public and private lands.

Action: Co.Co. to follow up on these Planning stipulations and enforce native hedgerow re-instatement.

Developmental Habitat Mitigation Scheme

A scheme should be considered to ensure all development of Greenfield sites mitigate for any loss of habitat (however ecologically diverse). Such a scheme would stipulate that site developers undertake one of the two following measures:

- Develop habitats on site to offset all areas of hard engineering, i.e. sow a native hedge on the site boundary, create and maintain areas of wildflower meadow, create a wildlife pond, plant a stand of native woodland or other such meaningful measures.
- Create native woodland/plant native trees off site or resource NGOs locally to undertake habitat restoration at key sites within the county to offset the effects of the development site.

*The size of the area created/restored should mirror the footprint of all built space at each site.

Ensure that landscape / green infrastructure plans are produced for all new developments at the outset of the design process in tandem with grey infrastructure design and that they incorporate features or measures to deliver maximum ecosystem services such as fostering biodiversity; enriching ecological, pedestrian and cycling networks; slowing and treating water run-off at source; improving air quality; enhancing aesthetics; minimising grey infrastructure requirements and costs; etc.

Tree Preservation Orders

Currently the county has no Tree Preservation Orders on individual or any stand of trees. It is vital that the relevant department establishes a catalogue of TPOs in order to give some level of protection to certain trees and stands of trees. All trees in the county should be considered where they have a particular importance historically, are old or ancient, are or form part of an important aesthetic or are important in terms of biodiversity or in their own right.

As part of this effort the LA should provide the relevant info and resources to the public via the Laois coco website in order for members of the public to nominate a trees for TPOs.

Some trees and stands of trees which should be considered immediately are:

- The stand of trees at the Downs, Portlaoise. These trees exist on the remnants of the esker that borders the town, it is an important geological feature in its own right and the existing trees are home to a large Rookery and winter roost site to thousands of crows. The tree line also forms a green corridor from the centre of town to the outskirts and into the countryside which accommodates the movement of wildlife to and from the urban green spaces in the town.
- The Oak, Beech and other mature trees in Irishtown Mountmellick. Judging by the size of these trees they are some of the oldest in the town, including those at Angrove Stud and in the residential properties both sides of the N80 leading up to the Fire Station in the town. All trees along this road, deemed to be of a certain age (100 years+) should be considered for TPOs.

Ash Dieback; 'Mitigate against the potential impacts of Ash Dieback on our landscape, particularly within our hedgerows and woodlands, by supporting and encouraging the planting of other suitable trees on public and private lands.

Community (native) Woodlands

The creation of native species Community Woodlands (CW) should be considered. Each CW created would provide; climate and carbon sequestration benefits, provide habitat for native flora and fauna, provide locally sources and sustainable fuel for heating homes and provide an outdoor amenity area for respective communities. These schemes could be funded/actioned in part by schemes such as the Neighbourwood Scheme:

<https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/media/migration/forestry/grantandpremiumschemes/2015/NeighbourWoodScheme240717.pdf>

Such schemes if planned correctly could help aid flood management efforts locally and provide benefits in terms of water quality in respective river catchments.

Provision for Swifts

Swifts form an important part of our urban heritage in terms of their preferred nesting choice in old and dilapidated buildings in our urban and semi-urban settlements. Development has displaced Swifts from their colonies in many towns and villages across Laois and the species is threatened in Ireland as a result of national declines.

However, Swifts respond well to the creation of new nest sites and young Swifts can be encouraged to take up residence and breed in new novel locations such as nest boxes and integrated nest cavities.

It is proposed that the creation of Swift nest cavities should be made a standard stipulation in all new commercial and public building (schools/libraries etc) planning applications (new builds/redevelopments). All applications for buildings of more than two-stories or 5 meters high should be considered when making the stipulation by planning staff.

BirdWatch Ireland has published guidelines on measures for Swifts and offers assistance to any planner, architect or developer requiring assistance to carry out such measures.

Saving Swifts Guide: https://birdwatchireland.ie/app/uploads/2019/10/Saving-Swifts-Guide_pdf.pdf

Wildlife Corridors

County Laois has a rich diversity of habitats, and sites important at local, national and international levels. Many of these habitats remain unprotected and are in essence islands cut off from other biodiversity rich sites by hard infrastructure, agricultural lands and other barriers to the free movement of species.

A review of the county's habitats, land use and ownership of lands is required to identify opportunities to link these important sites by cooperation and a willingness from the multitude of stakeholders that will be identified.

Much of this data exists in the form of past, studies, reports and other available datasets but there is a task in compiling it in a clear and concise fashion.

Action: Fund and carry out a county wide habitat/land use audit and review as part of a multi-agency/group task force to identify opportunities to link important habitats and select lands for future conservation efforts.

Invasive Alien Species

Carry out a survey of selected Invasive Alien Species on key transport networks such as roads, rivers, parks and forests and develop a Strategy and Policy Document based on the results plus best guidance / practice.