

**MINUTES OF THE STATUTORY BUDGET MEETING OF LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL HELD ON
THE 8TH OF NOVEMBER 2021 IN THE DUNAMAISE ARTS CENTRE & THEATRE**

PRESENT:	Councillor	Conor Bergin	In The Chair
	Councillors	Willie Aird John Joe Fennelly James Kelly Aisling Moran John King Paschal McEvoy Catherine Fitzgerald Padraig Fleming	Paddy Bracken Noel Tuohy Seamus McDonald Caroline Dwane Stanley Thomasina Connell Ollie Clooney Ben Brennan P.J. Kelly
APOLOGIES:	Councillor	Mary Sweeney	Aidan Mullins

IN ATTENDANCE:

Messers John Mulholland, Chief Executive, Donal Brennan, Director of Services, Simon Walton, Director of Services, Ms. Angela McEvoy, A/Director of Services, Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance, Ms. Irene Delaney, A.O., & Ms. Michelle McCormack, S.O.

152. DRAFT BUDGET 2021

The Chief Executive, Mr. John Mulholland referred the Members to his report of November 4th 2021. He outlined the process that had been undertaken in relation to the preparation of the budget. The Chief Executive indicated that as Laois County Council strive to pull through the pandemic of the past twenty months it remains the case that there is a backdrop of uncertainty to the planning and preparation of the 2022 Revenue Budget for Laois County Council. The uncertainty stems from a number of factors, such as, the future trajectory of the virus and its impact on local economic and social wellbeing, the capacity of the Council to generate additional income from traditional sources of revenue, the ongoing impacts of Brexit and constraints on the Central Government purse following a period of national debt expansion.

In the current year, 2021, the level of rates waiver support amounts to €3.3 million to the end of quarter 3. The Q4 2021 waiver will apply to businesses in the hospitality, leisure, entertainment and tourism related sectors. The Council continues to incur Covid-19 related expenditure in areas such as workplace safety, upgrading of information technology and communications systems, supporting business and community resilience and assisting partner agencies in the public health response to Covid-19. There have been losses in income in the revenue stream areas of parking fees, library services, road opening licences and through the Council's associated Companies in leisure and arts facilities. This is estimated at € 800,000.

Looking towards 2022 there is a reasonable assumption that further Government support for Laois County Council will reduce significantly as business and enterprises return to near normal function and as the risk of further lockdowns across society diminishes. Indeed, at this time there is no indication of an extension of the commercial rates waiver scheme for 2022. The Council is also vigilant to the inevitability of increased business vacancy rates in the county and this will give rise to further uncollectable income from this source next

year. Furthermore, it should be noted that while quite a volume of business is now done online there is no mechanism open to Laois County Council to charge commercial rates in respect of such business.

Quite apart from Covid-19 related issues it is apparent that price inflation in the energy, construction products and public tendering sectors will impact on the financial health of the Council for 2022.

- Inflation for 2022 is forecast at 2.9% (*Central Bank of Ireland, Q4 Quarterly Bulletin, 2021*)
- Tender prices nationally jumped by 7% in first half of 2021. (*SCSI*)
- Energy prices have increased by 20 to 25%

In addition, there will be short term difficulties in the supply chain mainly associated with current global developments and Brexit complications. This will affect the business operations of Laois County Council and will give rise to some cost increases.

In summary the 2022 Revenue Budget aims to:-

- (i) Provide assistance and support to those in need of homes and to those most at risk of homelessness;
- (ii) Continue to stimulate economic and business recovery through local development and investment infrastructure and business supports generally;
- (iii) Promote County Laois as a location of preference for remote working and environmentally friendly tourism;
- (iv) Promote a clean and pristine environment conducive to a good standard of public health and wellbeing and in particular, to build on the excellent work in bringing Portlaoise to the status of Ireland's cleanest Town;
- (v) Make provision for the many challenges to be addressed under the Climate Action Plan

The main factors shaping the drafting of the 2022 budget are:

On the income side:

1. An assumption of a rebound in business and retail resulting in a reasonable yield from commercial rates
2. Retaining an increased income from the Local Property Tax, as in 2021, in the amount of €506,273.
3. An increase of €483,000 from rents on Council owned houses mainly as a result of increased housing stock in the Councils ownership.
4. Broadly similar allocations to Laois County Council under the non-national roads programme as compared with 2021
5. Some buoyancy in commercial rates income, particularly from large utility providers and new business in the county.
6. An expectation of increased vacancy levels in certain retail and business sectors

On the expenditure side:

1. To provide improvements in the County's main towns and villages including a more extensive use of the CPO process to acquire derelict buildings.
2. The requirement to continue a planned maintenance programme to address heating system and other upgrades in Council housing stock.

3. A requirement to provide matched funding to support a number of projects and initiatives including,
 - a. the Town and Village Renewal Schemes
 - b. The Rural Regeneration Development and Urban Regeneration Fund projects
 - c. the Fáilte Ireland Tourism Destination Towns scheme
 - d. CLAR programmes
4. The requirement to meet targets and develop actions to comply with Public Sector obligations in the Climate Action Plan 2019.
5. The requirement to provide support to business and tourism recovery in the County.

The Annual Budget for 2022 provides for a significant and continued level of investment in the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of County Laois. The gross revenue expenditure required to run public services in Laois on a day to day basis is €88.337 million representing an increase of 12% in comparison with 2021.

The following areas of expenditure are of particular note:

- **€270,500** additional expenditure over 2021 on the maintenance of Council housing units and to include the recruitment of additional tradesmen and apprentices to assist with relets, maintenance and other areas of housing activity;
- The budget provides **€46,000** towards the recruitment of additional technical staff to fully resource an expanded role by Laois County Council in tackling dereliction/vacancy;
- Provision of **€1,304,000** for local road maintenance;
- A sum of **€225,000** towards the continuance of activities at Council owned Leisure Centres including support for Ballinakill swimming pool;
- Provision of **€207,000** towards matched funding for urban renewal in Portlaoise and Portarlington;
- Additional funding of **€23,000** towards heritage projects on churches and graveyards, Tinnakill Heritage House, heritage works in Donaghmore and Rathdowney and a biodiversity action plan;
- A sum of **€20,000** in respect of preparations for the world ploughing championship,
- Provision of an additional **€40,000** towards maintaining standards in street cleanliness;
- A book fund of **€25,000** in respect of the new County Library;
- A provision of **€89,000** towards ensuring that Laois County Council can monitor and protect its IT systems against cyber attacks;
- Provision of an additional sum of **€39,000** for community projects to be decided at Municipal District level;
- An additional **€41,000** for unfinished housing estates;
- An extra **€30,000** towards climate change and flooding;
- An additional **€24,500** for maintenance of playgrounds;
- **€10,500** for green schools;
- Provision of a sum of **€10,000** towards feasibility of municipal indoor sports arena;

It was noted that all aspects of the draft budget were discussed in detail at the information meeting held on the 2nd of November 2021. Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance then proceeded to advise the members on a division by division basis of the Council's Expenditure & Income proposals for 2022.

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Councillor Willie Aird proposed the draft Budget for 2022 as presented and this was seconded by Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald.

The Members collectively and individually complemented Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance and all the staff involved in the preparation of the budget. The Chief Executive, Head of Finance & Directors of Services responded to the various queries raised by the Members.

The Chief Executive extended his appreciation to Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance and staff in the Finance Section for their work in the preparation of the budget. He also extended his appreciation to the Directors of Services and their staff members for their commitment and hard work over the past year. The Chief Executive thanked the Cathaoirleach, Councillor Conor Bergin and his predecessor, Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald, the Corporate Policy Group, the Chairs of the Municipal Districts and the Elected Members for their assistance during the year. The Chief Executive also paid tribute to Mr. Tom Mulhall, former Councillor with Laois County Council who retired earlier in the year and to Councillor Mary Sweeney who will be retiring shortly.

This concluded the business of the meeting.

SIGNED: _____
CATHAOIRLEACH

CERTIFIED: _____
**DIRECTOR OF SERVICES
CORPORATE AFFAIRS**