

**MINUTES OF THE JUNE MEETING OF LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL HELD ON THE 29TH OF JUNE
IN THE DUNAMAISE ARTS CENTRE & THEATRE**

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

IN ATTENDANCE:

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

56. VOTE OF SYMPATHY

Councillor William Aird Cathaoirleach proposed Votes of Sympathies to the Goodwin Family, Kilbride, Portarlinton on the recent death of Ms. Anne Goodwin, CEO of Laois Partnership & to the Coss Family on the recent death of Mrs. Noreen Coss, Grattan Street, Portlaoise, mother of Ms. Louise Coss, Roads Section and wife of Matt Coss, retired General Services Supervisor, Central Area Office.

Councillor Tom Mulhall proposed Votes of Sympathies to the Corcoran Family on the death of Ms. Brenda Corcoran, Vicarstown Road, Stradbally, Co. Laois & also to the Scully Family on the death of Mr. Patrick Scully, Garrymaddock, Vicarstown, Co. Laois.

Councillor Ben Brennan proposed a Vote of Sympathy to the Walsh Family, Mayo, Crettyard on the death of Mr. Jimmy Walsh.

Councillor Willie Aird also referred to the vote of sympathy extended to the McDonald Family and Councillor Mary Sweeney at the April meeting on the death of Jim and held a minutes silence in accordance with the bereavement protocol of Laois County Council as a mark of respect to the late Jim.

57. CONFIRMATION OF THE MINUTES OF THE MAY MEETING OF LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL HELD ON THE 20TH OF MAY 2020

On the proposition of Councillor John Joe Fennelly seconded by Councillor Mary Sweeney, the Members unanimously agreed to the minutes of the May meeting of Laois County Council held on the 20th of May 2020

58. REPORT ON MUNICIPAL DISTRICT MEETINGS HELD IN FEBRUARY & MAY 2020

On the proposition of Councillor Seamus McDonald seconded by Councillor Paddy Bracken, the Members unanimously agreed the reports on Municipal District Meetings held in February & May of 2020.

59. DISPOSAL OF FREEHOLD INTEREST AT 38 GROVE PARK, MOUNTMELICK, CO. LAOIS

On the proposition of Councillor Paddy Bracken seconded by Councillor Conor Bergin, the Members unanimously agreed to the disposal of freehold interest at 38 Grove Park, Mountmellick, Co. Laois in the townland of Ballycullenbeg for a consideration of €1.00.

60. DISPOSAL OF FREEHOLD INTEREST AT 13 BIANCONI WAY, RIDGE, ROAD, PORTLAOISE

On the proposition of Councillor Caroline Dwane Stanley seconded by Councillor Thomasina Connell, the Members unanimously agreed to the disposal of freehold interest at 13 Bianconi Way, Ridge Road, Portlaoise in the townland of Borris Little for a consideration of €1.00.

61. RATIFICATION OF MR. BRENDAN BIRNEY AS THE LAOIS I.F.A. REPRESENTATIVE ON THE JOINT POLICING COMMITTEE

On the proposition of Councillor Conor Bergin seconded by Councillor John King, the Members unanimously agreed to the ratification of Mr. Brendan Birney as the Laois I.F.A. representative on the Joint Policing Committee.

62. ASSOCIATED COMPANIES OF LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL – REPORT ON RISK RATINGS DUE TO COVID PANDEMIC INCLUDING A REPORT ON THE LEISURE CENTRE

The Members were circulated with a report on the current status of the following Associated Companies which was noted by the Members:-

- The Laois Arts Theatre Company Ltd
- Portlaoise Enterprise Centre Ltd
- Portarlinton Enterprise Centre Ltd
- The Portlaoise Innovation Centre DAC
- Treo Nua Ltd
- Portarlinton Leisure Centre

On the proposition of Councillor William Aird seconded by Councillor John Joe Fennelly, the Members unanimously agreed that the reigning Chairperson should be on the board of the Portlaoise Innovation Centre DAC going forward.

The Chief Executive briefed the Members on the status of the Portlaoise Leisure Centre following its closure on the 15th of June 2020. He advised that there was ongoing engagement between the Company and Laois County Council over recent months but unfortunately the situation could not be turned around. The Company had set up a new finance committee in March 2018 and had set about making great efforts to incentivise new custom and membership. The company, its Directors, volunteers and staff deserve much credit for the steps taken in the last year or so.

Laois County Council for its part as the Licensor undertook to carry out an independent review of the business model of the Leisure Centre in 2019 and had agreed more intensive and more frequent engagement with the company throughout 2020. The Council also confirmed there would be no outsourcing to the private sector in a letter issued to the Company on the 26th of February 2020. There was nonetheless a lengthy delay in getting a review underway and as yet it has not commenced.

On foot of the Members many concerns, Mr. John Mulholland, Chief Executive, in conclusion confirmed the following:-

- The Leisure Centre is closed because it was forced to do so in the interest of protecting public health
- The Directors of the company made decisions to liquidate based on their responsibilities under Company Law
- Given the massive strain on the Councils finances it would be simply unfeasible for the Council to come up with funds to keep the company afloat (€300k). The Council will be facing big losses in income in the coming year and may well have to consider a supplementary Budget.
- It is not true to say the Council will turn it over to private operators
- The complex is not viable or attractive to any commercial business entity – too much uncertainty and provision of new physical constraints due to Covid Response Plan for the centre
- The staff of Portlaoise Leisure Centre were employed by the company not by Laois County Council
- No member of management of Laois County Council has the power, authority or right to make the Portlaoise Leisure Centre staff redundant or the authority to close it.
- A liquidator is now in place and keys have been handed to Laois County Council, the Company ceased trading on 16th June.

Mr. Mulholland, Chief Executive confirmed the three possible scenarios for the future of the complex:

- (i) Closure – under no circumstances will this be considered – an outstanding asset for the community will not be allowed to run into disrepair
- (ii) Outsourcing under licence/contract to private sector entity. This will not happen and in any event many private sector entities are facing same issue and will not have any interest in running an enterprise that may be reduced to running at 50% of its capacity
- (iii) Transitional arrangement under licence with not for profit company. This is the most likely scenario and the one that Laois County Council will explore in detail over the short term.

The Council is now working towards a solution that would see a new licensee, new governance, new management and a new operational structure. The Council will also carry out essential repair and maintenance works on the building, and will work to finding solutions

to facilitate the re-opening of the centre in phases including the playing pitches, playground and skate park.

63. REVIEW OF THE LAOIS COUNTY DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2017-2023 – CONSIDERATION OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE’S REPORT SUBMITTED ON THE 5TH OF MAY 2020 ON THE 1ST STAGE OF PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE REVIEW OF THE LAOIS COUNTY DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2017-2023 AND STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS TO BE GIVEN IN RELATION TO THE PREPARATION OF THE DRAFT PLAN FOR THE PERIOD 2021-2027

Ms. Angela McEvoy, Senior Planner gave a presentation on the above and also referred to the recent workshop for Members which was held by Teams. The Members were reminded of the timeframe and their requirements at this stage of the process. Ms. McEvoy detailed the various submissions received and advised of the various matters which should be taken into consideration in the preparation of the next County Development Plan. She advised the Members that in accordance with Section 11 (4) of the Planning and Development Act 2000 as amended, directions shall be strategic in nature and take account of the statutory obligations of the local authority and any relevant policies or objectives for the time being of the Government or any minister of the Government.

In issuing directions, Members are restricted to considering the proper planning and sustainable development of the area to which the development Plan relates

The following Directions were given:

1. The Plan shall focus on the **tourism product** available in County Laois and, in particular, ensure policies and objectives address the development of walking and cycling routes (Erkina Blueway, peatlands, Slieve Bloom Bike Trail, Durrow Cycle Hub) and in particular the safety of such routes along public roads should be incorporated into any policies, eg Killenure to Mountrath.
2. The plan should include for improved facilities at the **Rock of Dunamaise** to improve tourism facilities in the vicinity of same.
3. A policy in relation to **log cabin development** needs to be provided in the Plan. It is noted that this type of development is a more temporary form of accommodation and also area specific only.
4. The Draft Plan should address roads polices where **orbital routes** have been included in LAPs - the impact of losing valuable land to facilitate same that should be used for residential development is of concern. The need for these orbital routes should be justified and if not justified taken out.
5. Policies to ensure that more **social housing and affordable housing** is delivered throughout the county should be included in the Draft Plan. Innovative development solutions should be considered.
6. Support the inclusion of a **residential backland development** policy in urban areas to make more efficient use of zoned land.

7. **An objective to prepare Joint Local Area Plans** for both Portarlington and Graiguecullen with the relevant Local Authorities should be included.
8. The Plan should focus on **town and village centre regeneration** and renewal and address dereliction and vacancy to ensure the viability of town/village centres, in particular Portarlington and Stradbally were noted. The Plan should encourage the use of **Compulsory Purchase Orders** to address dereliction and to provide additional public buildings in the County.
9. The Draft Plan should contain policies to support **co-working spaces and remote working hubs**, especially in more rural location where community centres can provide that vital resource to address the circa 12,000 commuting to Dublin every day to work from Co. Laois.
10. In relation to **climate change**, objectives need to be integrated into all chapters. In particular every new business should incorporate climate mitigation measures.
11. The preservation of **Peatlands** should be incorporated into the Plan with a focus on more wildlife areas for biodiversity and attracting more visiting members of the public.
12. The roll out of the National Broadband Plan will have significant impact on trees in the county and the possibility of introducing **Tree Preservation Orders**. A policy should be included that all associated infrastructure be in the form of underground cabling where appropriate and sustainable.
13. Grow the County as a **nationally important centre for economic development** supported by the J17 National Enterprise Park. A discussion regarding the potential for enterprises such as PPE factories should be considered for the County was had.
14. In relation to **transport** within the County, the County Development Plan needs to support the improvement of transport network and in particular the requirements for high speed train travel between Portlaoise and Dublin. The potential to develop a regional airport for the Midlands was mentioned.
15. Standards should be included for **Bicycle parking** in developments.
16. Support **serviced sites development** to address the issue of one off housing. Durrow was noted as a town with need for same.
17. Support for the development of a **Blueway** on the River Erkina and walking / cycling routes around Durrow / Cullohill should be included in the Draft Plan.
18. **Sewerage Schemes** should be considered for extensions where needed and included in the Draft Plan.
19. The roll out of **Electric Vehicle charging points** is essential across the County, policies should be contained within the plan in this regard. .

Discussion regarding the structure and future direction for the County of Laois contained in the EMRA Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy was also had. Ms McEvoy outlined that strong submissions were made on behalf of Laois County Council during the course of the preparation of the RSES. It was noted that County Laois had 2 key growth towns – Portlaoise and Graiguecullen which will strengthen the economic future of the county. Many of the policies and objectives to be included in the Draft Laois County Development Plan will be informed by the RSES policy outcomes and will be tailored to the needs to the County.

Ms. McEvoy provided the Members with clarifications in relation to some of the issues raised and advised that their comments would be included in the Pre Draft Plan. She noted the timeframes allowed for in the legislation were as follows:- no later than 12 weeks after receipt of any directions from the Member, prepare a pre-draft plan for the Members' consideration. However given the stay on timelines as a result of the COVID pandemic, additional time may be taken. The Members will have an 8-week period in which to amend the Plan and the Plan would then go on Public Display for a 10-week period. It is expected to present a Pre Draft Plan in October 2020 for the Members Consideration.

64. MULTI-ANNUAL RIVER DRAINAGE MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME – PRESENTATION BY MR. SIMON WALTON DIRECTOR OF SERVICES

Mr. Simon Walton, Director of Services gave a presentation on the multi-annual approach for River Maintenance in County Laois including:-

- River Catchments and Networks in the County
- Statutory Responsibilities
- Drainage Districts
- Budgeting and funding for maintenance works

Mr. Simon Walton, Director of Services responded to the various queries and indicated that the plan will enable more coherent planning, allow consultation with landowners, allow for improved liaison with neighbouring Local Authorities, allow for statutory designation on rivers and will facilitate the Members in their consideration of the annual budget.

It was also noted that Laois County Council have made application to the Just Transition Fund for a project geared towards the re-utilisation of Bord na Mona resources to the creation of a flood resilient Midlands Region. Mr. Walton, Director of Services indicated that the proposed programme will be reviewed by each Municipal District. Elected Members unanimously supported the proposed approach.

62. LAOIS YOUTH VOLUNTEERS AND LAOIS YOUNG CREATIVES

Mr. Donal Brennan, Director of Services briefed the Members on this new initiative which Laois County Council, Laois Partnership and the LOETB have developed. In light of Covid-19 and the summer having restricted work opportunities for college students, this proposal will give opportunities to students by working with local volunteer organisations such as Tidy Towns, Cemetery Committees, Meals & Wheels, etc., Historical/Heritage Societies, Biodiversity Groups/Climate, Artistic Organisations & Voluntary Sporting Organisations. Laois County Council will increase the 2020 Annual Grant to Tidy Town Groups & Individual Cemetery Committees by 20% who recruit more than 5 new student volunteers in the 18-25 age group for the purpose of the initiative. There will also be a bursary of €2,500 for any research and creative projects

under the Arts/Communications/IT, Biodiversity Projects, Research Projects & Volunteer of the Summer.

The Members congratulated all involved in the wonderful initiative which will present great opportunities for students. On the proposition of Councillor James Kelly seconded by Councillor Willie Aird, the Members unanimously agreed to the initiative and thanked all agencies concerned.

63. LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL MONTHLY MANAGEMENT REPORT FOR MAY 2020

Mr. John Mulholland, Chief Executive briefed the meeting on this matter and the report for June 2020 was circulated. The report was unanimously agreed and noted. A number of queries were raised on the report and the Directors of Services responded to the various queries raised.

This concluded the business of the meeting.

SIGNED:

CATHAOIRLEACH

CERTIFIED:

**DIRECTOR OF SERVICES
CORPORATE AFFAIRS**