

**MINUTES OF THE STATUTORY BUDGET MEETING OF LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL HELD ON  
THE 7<sup>th</sup> OF NOVEMBER 2022 IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, ÁRAS AN CHONTAE,**

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

**IN ATTENDANCE:**

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

**129. DRAFT BUDGET 2023**

The Chief Executive, Mr. John Mulholland referred the Members to his report of November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2022. Mr. Mulholland, Chief Executive referred to the many difficult issues that Laois County Council has faced and overcome since 1899, including rampant inflation and unemployment in the 1970's and 80's, the financial crash of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020/21 but none have been comparable to the current set of circumstances precipitated by the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. The impact of the invasion in Ukraine is well documented elsewhere and for Laois County Council this means providing for much increased energy costs, higher material costs, increased wages and inflation all of which will hit the bottom line on the revenue budget in an adverse way. The impacts on local economic and social wellbeing have already been felt and it remains to be seen how this will further pan out in the year ahead. Therefore, the capacity of the Council to generate much needed additional income from traditional sources of revenue both locally and from the central exchequer is extremely limited.

The context of the 2023 Budget is very much set against the live background of a rapid transition from the Covid-19 pandemic to major conflict in Eastern Europe and its consequences in this country. Laois County Council, through its procurement framework, has been notified of very large increases in energy costs, road making materials and construction products. Specifically, the following categories of price escalation must be provided for in the 2023 budgetary arithmetic:

- **Energy and electricity charges : 266%**
- **Road making materials : 30%**
- **Diesel, petrol, gas : 35% to 60% since Jan 2022.**
- **Construction price index : 14% (ref SCSl)**

It is also noted that inflation generally is running at 9.5% and that for 2023 inflation is forecast at 8%. Taken together these increases will give rise to roughly €3million additional costs in the year ahead just to stand still.

In recent weeks this Council has been advised through its parent Department that much needed financial support will be made available in extra provision for energy costs and in respect of the national pay agreement. Were it not for the ongoing support of central Government the budgetary prospects for 2023 would be extremely bleak and it is clear that Laois County Council would have had to reduce services in a drastic way.

In the first quarter of 2022 it was very much the case that Laois County Council was still working within the physical, social and financial parameters of the Covid-19 pandemic. Members will recall that most restrictions were removed towards the end of February this year and that since that time normal functioning of the Council and external business has returned.

At a summary level the 2023 Revenue Budget aims to:-

- (i) Provide assistance and support to those in need of homes and to those most at risk of homelessness; it also for the first time includes a small provision in respect of a Council contribution to affordable housing,
- (ii) Continue to stimulate economic and business recovery through local development and investment infrastructure and business supports generally,
- (iii) Enhance the reputation of the County as an events and business centre of scale
- (iv) Promote a clean and pristine environment conducive to a good standard of public health and wellbeing and to strive towards high quality public spaces in our towns, villages and parks,
- (v) Make provision for the many challenges to be addressed under the Climate Action Plan 2021 including energy efficiency and retrofitting of homes and public buildings and
- (vi) Assist as partners in the national effort to provide emergency accommodation for refugees.

The main factors shaping the drafting of the 2023 budget are:-

**On the income side:**

1. An assumption of little growth in business and retail resulting in no additional yield from commercial rates
2. Retaining an increased income from the Local Property Tax in the amount of €474,826
3. An increase of €497,000 from rents on 2,300 Council owned houses,
4. An assumption that Laois County Council will benefit from State Grants for road upkeep and roads improvements in line with previous years.
5. An expectation of movement in vacancy levels in certain retail and business sectors

**On the expenditure side**

1. To continue to progress deep retrofitting work in 61 Council owned houses in 2023 and to continue with a planned maintenance programme to address heating system and other upgrades in Council housing stock.
2. To provide physical improvements in the County's main towns and villages including a more extensive use of the CPO process to acquire derelict buildings.

3. A requirement to provide matched funding to support a number of projects and programmes including:-
  - a. the Town and Village Renewal Schemes
  - b. The Rural Regeneration Development and Urban Regeneration Fund projects
  - c. Outdoor recreational improvement schemes
  - d. CLAR programmes
4. The requirement to meet targets and develop actions to comply with Public Sector obligations in the Climate Action Plan 2021.
5. The requirement to provide support to business and tourism in the county.

The Annual Budget for 2023 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 €95.809 million representing an increase of 8.4% in comparison with 2022.

The following areas of additional expenditure are of particular note:

- **€137,000** additional expenditure over 2022 on the maintenance of Council housing units and an additional sum of **€46,000** is included for increased tenant engagement activity
- An additional sum of **€190,000** for the provision of carbon monoxide alarms and fire blankets in Council houses
- **€185,000** additional expenditure is included for relets of Council houses
- **€160,000** additional expenditure is provided for retro fitting and energy efficiency works on Council houses
- Inclusion of **€45,000** as a contribution of LCC towards the affordable home's subsidy
- The budget includes a new provision **€134,000** towards the role by Laois County Council in assisting with the Ukrainian Refugee crisis;
- Provision of **€360,000** for footpath improvements at municipal level;
- An additional sum of **€87,000** towards the maintenance of burial grounds
- Provision of an additional **€89,000** towards the preparation of a Laois Climate Action Plan,
- Additional funding of **€40,000** towards conservation grants and heritage projects on churches, graveyards and heritage buildings,
- A sum of **€21,500** in respect of preparations for the national ploughing championship,
- Additional funding of **€94,100** in respect of the parks, playgrounds and open spaces;
- A provision of an additional **€116,000** towards drainage works throughout the County;
- Provision of an additional sum of **€7,000** for community projects to be decided at Municipal District level;
- An additional **€93,000** for cyber security and ICT improvements;
- Continued support for small businesses through the rates incentive and vacant property incentive schemes.

It was noted that all the aspects of the Budget for 2023 were discussed in detail at the information meeting held on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 2022. Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance then proceeded to go through all aspects of the expenditure and revenue budget on a division by division basis.

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Councillor Ollie Clooney proposed the draft budget for 2023 as presented and this was seconded by Councillor James Kelly.

The Members collectively and individually complimented Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance and his team in the preparation of the budget. The Chief Executive, Head of Finance and the 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 Thomasina Connell and her predecessor, Councillor Conor Bergin, the Corporate Policy Group, the Chairs of the Municipal Districts and the Elected Members for their assistance during the year.

### **130. CAPITAL INDICATIVE REPORT 2023-2025**

The Members were circulated with details of the Indicative Capital Programme for 2023-2025 totalling €259,624,000 million including the list of projects. Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance briefed the Members on the various areas and responded to the queries raised.

This concluded the business of the meeting.

**SIGNED:**

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**CATHAOIRLEACH**

**CERTIFIED:**

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**DIRECTOR OF SERVICES  
CORPORATE AFFAIRS**