

CHAPTER 2 – STRATEGIC CONTEXT

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CHAPTER 2: STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Aim: To facilitate the future sustainable development of County Laois so as to optimise the benefits of its location in accordance with the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and the Regional Planning Guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Laois is an inland county in the south midlands of Ireland covering an area of 171,990 hectares, which equates to 2.4% of the national landmass. Occupying a strategic position near the centre of the country, Co. Laois is land locked and shares borders with five adjoining counties - Kildare, Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary and Offaly.
- 2.2 At its nearest, Co. Laois is approx 70kms from the Dublin metropolitan area. This relative proximity to the capital city, as road and rail access connections improve, is having a major effect on both the nature and extent of development, particularly in the northern and eastern parts of the County.
- 2.3 In physical terms, the landmass of Co. Laois consists of a central plain containing most of the productive agricultural land, surrounded by a number of upland areas including the Slieve Bloom Mountains in the northwest, The Killeslin Plateau in the South East and Cullahill Mountain in the south
- 2.4 Approximately 0.01% of Co. Laois is covered by water. The principal rivers are the Barrow and Nore, which flow in a north west - south east direction. The Grand Canal passes through the north east of the county. Both the Grand Canal and Barrow Navigation offer much by way of natural and cultural heritage, tourism, leisure and recreational potential.
- 2.5 As regards transport and communications, some of the country's most significant sections of national route network traverse Co. Laois. These include Dublin – Cork national primary route N8, Dublin – Limerick national primary route N7 and Rosslare - Athlone – Castlebar national secondary route N80. In addition, approximately 14kms of the national primary route M7/N8 bypassing Portlaoise has motorway status, as does the Monasterevin – Heath/Mayfield link which opened in 2004. Further improvements to these routes are earmarked in the National Development Plan. The entire N7 and N8 routes will be replaced by motorway and dual carriageway standard under the National Development Plan.
- 2.6 Significant improvements to the N80 route are envisaged under the terms of the National Development Plan (NDP). Access, both to and from, Co. Laois will be greatly improved as a result of these road infrastructural programmes, thereby facilitating further economic expansion.
- 2.7 Co. Laois is served by a number of mainline and commuter train services. Mainline infrastructure consists of the main Dublin/Cork line with stations at Portarlinton, Portlaoise & Ballybrophy. The Galway/Westport line via Athlone branches off at Portarlinton and at Ballybrophy there is a branch line to Limerick via Nenagh. In addition, improved commuter services between Portlaoise and Portarlinton and the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) have played a central role in the residential expansion of these towns. A modern, efficient and reliable rail network has a crucial role to play in terms of promoting Co. Laois for business, industrial, residential and recreational purposes.

OVERALL OBJECTIVES

- To promote balanced sustainable economic and social development across the County, in particular those set out in the context of future development of County Laois in the NSS and Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines;
- To develop good infrastructural linkage across the county so as to improve the competitiveness of the Region at a national level;
- To identify the strengths and opportunities of the County and develop policies that will contribute to the sustainable development of the region.

Sustainable development is defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" Sustainable development implies economic growth together with the protection of environmental quality, each reinforcing the other.



NATIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY

- 2.8 Portlaoise was identified as having good development potential as a **transport hub and distribution centre** and as an **“inland port”** in the National Spatial Strategy (NSS). Towns such as Portarlinton and Mountmellick can be enhanced through physical and townscape improvements, provision of adequate water services, facilities for smaller enterprises and enhancement to road and bus networks. This will enhance the possibilities of providing a more attractive environment to live, work or socialise.
- 2.9 The development of the rural villages is also flagged as being of importance to the strategic growth of both the county and the region as a whole. The smaller towns and villages can help sustain the projected economic growth of the larger towns within the regions, whilst preserving the character and protecting the built and natural heritage.

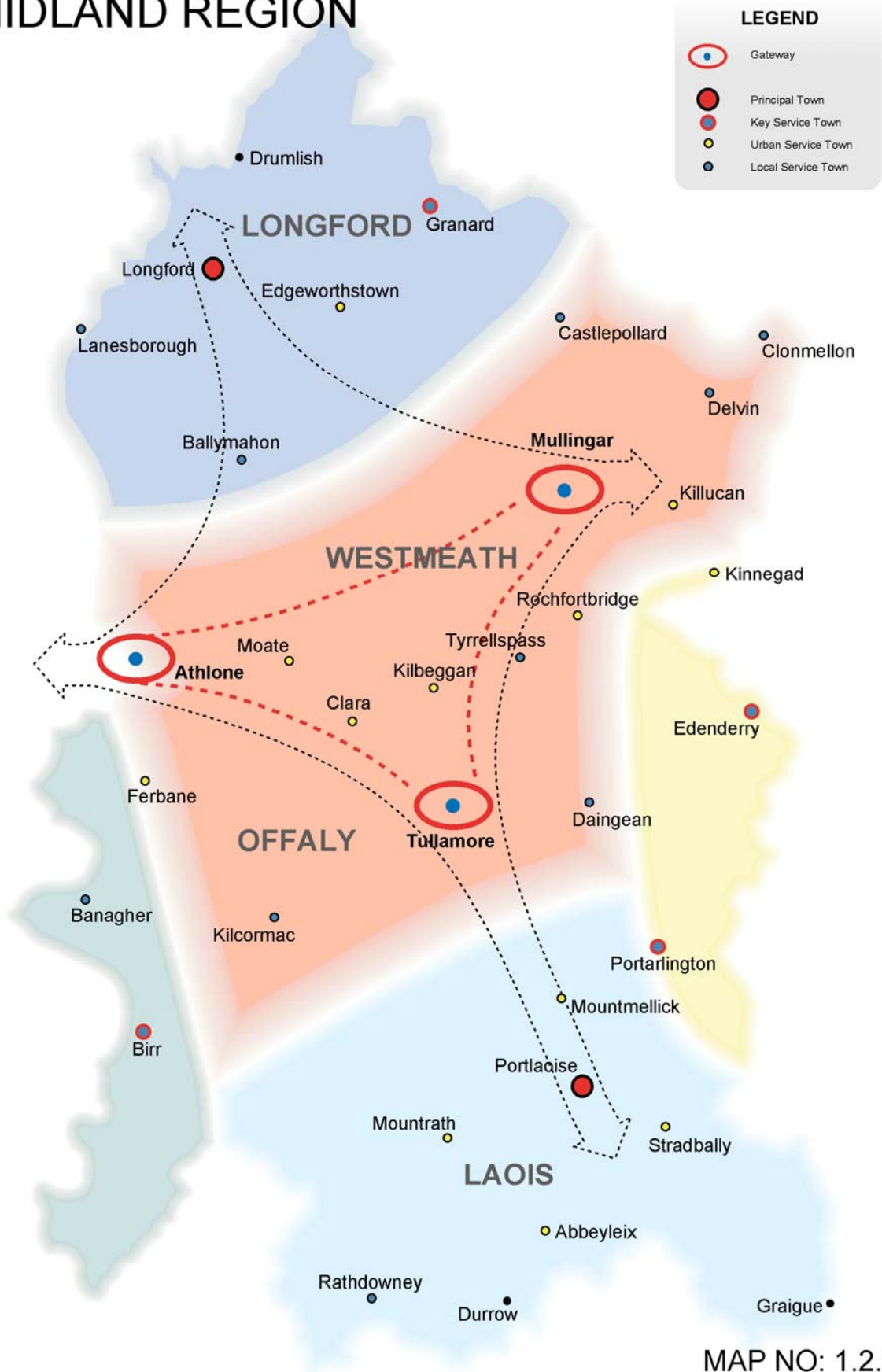
“Enhancing the critical mass in the Midlands Region by combining the complementary strengths of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore as a gateway at the heart of the region is essential to boosting the regions overall economic strength. It will also be important to build on the central location of the Midlands and the key towns at the intersection of the national road and rail route, the attractiveness of the village structure in the Midlands and the natural and other resources of more rural areas” (Section 4.4 NSS).

- 2.10 The implementation of the NSS has proceeded through the implementation of the County Laois Economic and Promotional Strategy for the County, (prepared by A & L Goodbody) and adopted by Laois County Council in 2003. This strategy was incorporated into the Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines and adopted in May 2004. This document represents both a strategic development and planning vision for the region up to 2020. The framework for implementing that vision is through the functions of a wide range of public and private interests including Laois County Council, development agencies, infrastructural providers and private development interests.

THE MIDLANDS REGIONAL PLANNING GUIDELINES – KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNTY LAOIS

- 2.11 The Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines were adopted by the Midland Regional Planning Authority and their main provisions are being given a statutory basis and further implemented through the individual County Development Plans. The Region is defined on the accompanying map (Map 1.2.2).

MIDLAND REGION



- 2.12 The vision, as set out in the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines, is "to develop the Midland Region into a successful, sustainable and equitable region of opportunities, for its expanded population, achieved through enhancing critical mass by combining the strengths of the linked gateway as envisaged in the NSS with those of the County towns of Portlaoise and Longford".
- 2.13 Some of the key implications for County Laois will require the improvement of linkages within the Midlands Region in line with the gateway concept proposed in the NSS. This will be achieved through:
- Facilitating alternative employment opportunities to aid the reversal of population decline in rural areas;
 - Promoting balanced sustainable development, to strengthen the identity of the County;
 - Promoting the distinct and unique image and identity of the Midlands, that will attract greater investment and economic activity to the region;
 - Co-ordinated Rail and road network improvements;
 - Co-operation with the other counties in the region, in promoting the tourism potential of the natural environment;
 - Using the potential of the ICT network to promote linkages between the counties in the region;
- 2.14 "Balanced regional development requires recognition of the diversity of the region and the current functions and strengths that operate within each spatial sector" (*Section 6.3 Regional Planning Guidelines*).

County Laois has a number of fundamental strengths and opportunities, which will help in developing the potential of the Region:

- The strategic geographically central location means that it has the potential to be a major transport hub and distribution centre and has the capacity to fulfil the role of an inland port;
- Strong network of secondary and tertiary settlements which provide vital support services to the surrounding hinterlands;
- Good quality physical environment which includes the Grand Canal, River Barrow, Heritage gardens and the Slieve Blooms amongst others;
- Strong service centre base;
- Well balanced population structure;
- An educated population;
- Potential to expand the work base;
- Good level of infrastructure;
- Proximity to Dublin; Cork and Limerick, and
- An established community network.

Strategic Development Opportunities

- 2.15 There are a number of locations which allow the development of new or expanded mixed use districts and provide opportunities to meet population and employment targets:

Portlaoise

Portlaoise's location on the motorway network makes it well suited to serve the distribution sector. Up to 30% of the traffic on the road network in County Laois is heavy goods vehicles (HGV's). The Togher Interchange area south of Portlaoise town off the motorway has been zoned for distribution and a limited amount of retail warehousing for bulky durable goods as defined in Para 4.36 in **Chapter 4: Enterprise and Employment**. The zoning also includes factory warehousing, showrooms, bus and coach stops, heliport, motorway services and industrial development, innovative/services park, opportunity sites and event centre. Development of a retail nature which would impact adversely on the town centre will not be allowed. The development of a Motorway services centre combined with a range of tourist and leisure facilities would give a range of options to address the needs of all ages and economic profiles and provide employment. The Council will consider other strategic locations subject to proper planning and sustainable development and development control standards.

Slieve Blooms

The Slieve Blooms are an important tourist product. This area has the potential to be competitive on the national and international market – particularly for walking holidays if the natural resource was complemented with a suitable accommodation base and a range of dining options.

Motorway Development M7/M8

The development of the Motorway from Dublin to Cork/Limerick will provide a range of strategic opportunities across the County particularly in the western end of the County, e.g. Rathdowney and its hinterland. The development of a Retail Outlet Centre at Rathdowney offers a foundation for growth in this location. Currently accessed via a number of regional and county roads, access will be much improved with the construction and opening of the M7/M8 Motorway development. The motorway development has been identified as a potential Public Private Partnership (PPP) and as such forms an important element of the delivery of the National Development Plan. A Toll Plaza is an integral part of the motorway project which has been approved by An Bord Pleanála. The National Roads Authority (NRA) will undertake the statutory tolling scheme in relation to this aspect of the project.

Portarlinton

Portarlinton is a town of strategic importance. Its potential for development is now being realised. The town is well served with a train service which links it to all parts of the Country. Large tracts of industrial land are underdeveloped and undeveloped. The closure of the Avon Factory has impacted negatively on the town. Recent population growth and residential developments are creating an opportunity for employment in the town.

POPULATION PROFILE FOR COUNTY LAOIS

- 2.16 According to the 2002 census, population figures for the state, provinces and individual counties have all shown increases during the intercensus period 1996 –2002 (See Table 2).

Table 2: Population Change 1996-2002 at County, Provincial & National Level

Locus	1996	2002	Actual Change 1996-2002	% change 1996-2002
Co. Laois	52,945	58,774	5,829	11%
Leinster	1,924,702	2,105,579	180,877	9.4%
Ireland	3,626,087	3,917,203	291,116	8%

Source: CSO, Ireland

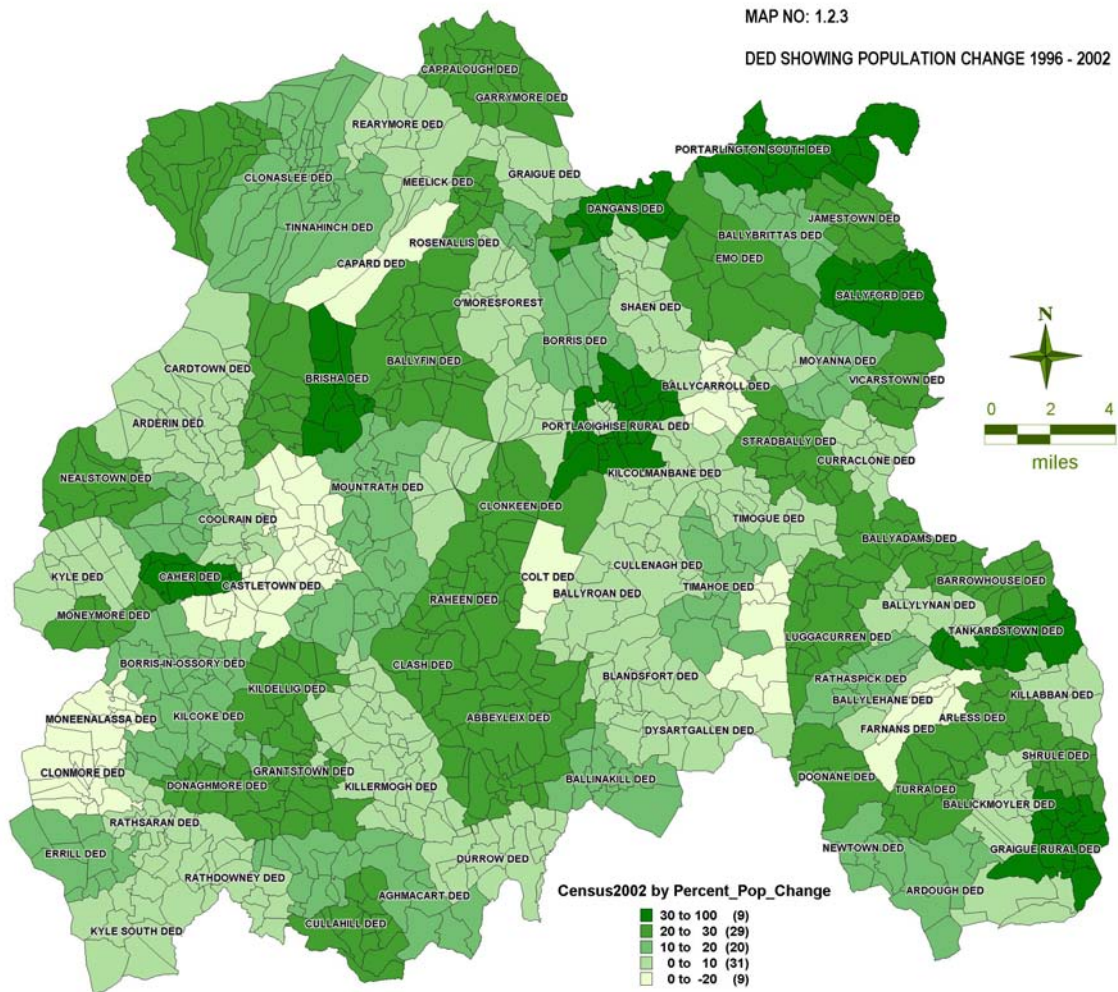
- 2.17 Between 1996 and 2002, the population of Ireland grew from 3,626,087 to 3,917,203, an increase of 291,116 see table or 8% over the 6 year period. The 2002 figure for the population of Leinster is 2,105,579 compared to 1,924,702 in 1996. This represents an increase of 180,877 or 9.4%.
- 2.18 The returns for Co. Laois mirror the national and regional trends though it is noteworthy that the percentage growth rate, at 11%, was actually higher. In 2002 Co. Laois had a population of 58,774 as against 52,945 in 1996, an increase of 5,829.
- 2.19 To put these figures into perspective, in the previous inter-censal period of 1991-1996 the percentage rates of population increase for the state, province and county were 2.8%, 3.4% and 1.2% respectively. Coinciding with the increase in population is a corresponding increase in migration into the County.
- 2.20 Economic Growth, over the past decade, has sparked off a period of unprecedented growth throughout the economy, which forms the main backdrop for the contemporary demographic trends at national, provincial and county level. Significance from the Co Laois perspective is the increasing influence of the greater Dublin commuter belt. This is as a result of improved road and rail access and the specific characteristics of the capital's housing market. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this phenomenon is responsible for a significant proportion of the population increase which has occurred in Portlaoise, Portlaoise and to a lesser extent in Mountmellick and in the rural areas in the east of the County.
- 2.21 While the overall picture is one of a sizeable population increase across the board, this masks some noticeable intra-county trends. For example, as indicated in table 3, some settlements grew more than others. The rates of increase between 1996 and 2002 in the county's three largest towns of Portlaoise, Portlaoise (Co. Laois area only) and Mountmellick stand at 28%, 27.5% and 15.4% respectively. Likewise, the population in the Carlow suburb of Graiguecullen and Borris in Ossory rose by 37.8% and 34% respectively, while the population of Stradbally grew by 12.5% and that of Abbeylaxey by 9.8%.
- 2.22 By contrast, the rates of increase in other settlements are much smaller, Rathdowney recorded an increase of 4.2%, Durrow 3%, Mountrath 2.5% and Castletown's population actually fell by 1.7%. What is becoming apparent, in general terms, at least is a divergence between the north and east of the county where fastest growth rates are occurring and the remainder of the county which is experiencing much more modest growth.

Table 3: Population Change in Co. Laois Settlements 1996-2002

Locus	1996	2002	Actual Change 1996-2002	% Change 1996-2002
Abbeyleix	1,259	1,383	124	9.8%
Ballinakill	299	328	29	9.7%
Ballylynan	406	430	24	5.9%
Borris-in-Ossory	282	379	97	34.4%
Castletown	294	289	-5	-1.7%
Durrow	696	717	21	3%
Emo	231	220	-11	-4.8%
Graigecullen	870	1,199	329	37.8%
Mountmellick	2,912	3,361	449	15.4%
Mounrath	1,298	1,331	33	2.5%
Portarlinton	2,162	2,756	594	27.5%
Portlaoise	9,474	12,127	2,653	28%
Rathdowney	1,066	1,111	45	4.2%
Stradbally	1,047	1,178	131	12.5%

Source: CSO Ireland

- 2.23 Focusing on the five Rural Districts, as the base unit for examining demographic change, a similar pattern unfolds. The population of Mountmellick rural area, which contains the three largest towns in Co. Laois, (Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Mountmellick) increased by 15.5 %, followed by Athy no.2 rural area, which contains Stradbally, by 7.6%, while Slieve Margy rural area where Graigecullen is located, saw its population grow by 8.4% (See Map 1.2.3).
- 2.24 These county wide demographic disparities are also apparent at townland level. Between 1996 and 2002, of the 28 townlands (out of a total number in Co. Laois of 98) that recorded population declines, 43% are located in Roscrea no.3 and Abbeyleix rural areas.
- 2.25 Conversely the townlands exhibiting greatest population increase are almost exclusively in Mountmellick, Athy no. 2 and Slievemargy rural areas. Examples include Dangan's - population increase 62%, Portarlinton South - 24%, Portlaoise (Maryborough) rural - 41.3% all of which are situated in close proximity to the largest urban centres in the county.



2.26 While County Laois is still an overwhelmingly rural county, the aggregate urban population is increasing. According to the 1996 census, 30.8% of the population lived in urban areas. By 2002 this had risen to 33.1%. In the context of a declining agricultural base and net rural outward migration, the trend towards increased urbanisation is likely to continue.

Projections

2.27 Population forecasts are an intrinsic element of any medium to long term planning for Co. Laois. They indicate the estimated population of the county at a future point in time.

2.28 By extension they will act as a guide regarding the amount of new infrastructural investment (including dwellings, schools, health, retail and leisure facilities, waste and wastewater services, roads etc.) required to service that estimated future population.

2.29 While population forecasting depends on a variety of variables, present indications are that, at a general level, recent trends in terms of residential development, population growth and household formation are expected to continue up to and including the next decade.

2.30 Assuming the 11% population growth rate experienced in the most recent intercensal period of 1996-02 is maintained Co. Laois will have a population, by 2020 of 80,380, a figure which is in line with Regional Planning Guidelines projections.

- 2.31 The ever strengthening linkages between Co. Laois and the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) accounts for a substantial proportion of the projected population increase. Ongoing improvements in road and rail infrastructure coupled with the inflated state of the housing market in the capital, has increasingly propelled the northern part of the county into the Greater Dublin commuting zone.
- 2.32 While commuting has played a major part in the recent expansion of Co. Laois, in the long term this is not considered sustainable for a variety of social and economic reasons including congestion, time and energy cost, pollution and diminution of family and community life.
- 2.33 Pending a state of equilibrium in the Dublin housing market (which is unlikely to occur in the short term), daily commuting from Co. Laois to the GDA in particular, but also to Tullamore, Kilkenny and Carlow will continue for the foreseeable future. Given this scenario one of the key challenges facing Co. Laois is how to reduce the dependency on commuting and at the same time build up the social and economic critical mass of the county.

Dependency

- 2.34 The dependency rate is measured in terms of the numbers of people in the dependent age cohorts i.e. 0-14 years and 65 years plus as a percentage of the overall population.
- 2.35 According to the 2002 census, Co. Laois has a dependency rate of 34.5% compared to a national dependency rate of 32% and a provincial rate of 31%. See Table 4.

Table 4. Dependency Rates 2002

Locus	0-4	5-9	10-14	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85+	Total Population.	Dependency Rate
State	277,630	264,090	285,708	133,974	112,129	89,815	58,857	41,226	3,917,203	32%
Leinster	151,928	139,759	149,512	62,004	59,459	43,273	27,758	19,092	2,105,758	31%
Co Laois	4,700	4,255	4,701	2,005	1,768	1,405	900	569	58,774	34.5%

Source: CSO, Ireland.

- 2.36 Present indications are that dependency rates at all levels will increase in the short to medium term at least, with knock-on repercussions for provision of health care, education, housing etc.

SOCIO ECONOMIC PROFILE OF COUNTY LAOIS

The main socioeconomic features of County Laois are as follows:

- The geographic triangle of Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Mountmellick has the potential to generate significant growth in investment at a local level and also inward into County Laois;
- The NSS concludes that Portlaoise has a role as a key national transport node with capacity to develop related economic and logistic activity;
- Fewer of the Laois population are in the category of employers, managers and higher professional (7.6%) than the national average (11.6%);
- Adequate lands are zoned for residential development in terms of population capacity, and
- House prices compare favourably to those elsewhere in the country, at 83% of the national average and are 61% of the average house price in Dublin.