

CHAPTER 4 – ENTERPRISE AND EMPLOYMENT

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CHAPTER 4: ENTERPRISE & EMPLOYMENT

Aim: To promote balanced and sustainable economic development and employment within the county, thereby ensuring that a diverse range of economic sectors are developed and supported.

Introduction

- 4.1 This chapter contains strategies and land use policies to guide the future economic development of the county and includes policies relating to Agriculture, Industry, Retailing, Commercial and Leisure.
- 4.2 The National Spatial Strategy 2002 - 2020 and Regional Planning Guidelines 2004 seek to encourage continued economic development in a way that is compatible with sustainability objectives.
- 4.3 Portlaoise has been identified as a Key Transport Node in the NSS. An integrated approach is now required to ensure that the county capitalises upon its strengths and opportunities and rises to the challenge of facilitating the future economic development of the county.

Objectives

- 4.4 The main objectives for the County Council are as follows:
- To identify areas offering opportunities for job creation;
 - To diversify the economy, including the rural areas, by promoting knowledge based industries, innovation, telecommunications, research and development, precision engineering, agriculture and tourism employment and childcare facilities;
 - To support the growth of existing economic centres;
 - To designate Enterprise and Renewal Areas;
 - To assist IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and the Laois County Enterprise Board in attracting direct investment, both new and relocated activities, through the flagship business park at Portlaoise and other appropriate locations in the County;
 - To promote enterprise, development, industry and logistics area associated with designation of Portlaoise as the National Transport Node and Inland Port;
 - To support existing heavy industrial areas, which would not be compatible with residential environments, and which may not be suited to locating in general industrial and commercial zones;
 - To encourage small scale indigenous enterprise units at appropriate locations in the County;
 - To counteract the imbalances between development in the east and west of the county;
 - To facilitate and encourage services and distribution sector.
 - To ensure that the principles of Sustainable Development are fully considered in planning for enterprise and economic development in the County.

Employment in County Laois

- 4.5 In January of 2003 there were 2,131 people on the live register in County Laois, a 15% increase on the December 2001 figure of 1,850. This represents an unemployment rate of 3.6% compared with the national average of 4.5% (March 2003)

- 4.6 In line with national and regional trends, the socio economic profile of Co. Laois is undergoing fundamental change. As illustrated in Table 6 below, service sector employment is expanding while that in certain primary and secondary activities is declining.
- 4.7 The figure for unemployment compares more than favourably with that of census 1996 when the unemployment rate in the county was almost 9%.
- 4.8 In the intervening period, unemployment in Co. Laois has been steadily declining, reflecting the ongoing economic prosperity at national, provincial and local level.

Table 6: Employment Change between 1996 and 2002 at County, Provincial & National Level

	Sector	1996	% of Labour Force	2002	% of Labour Force
Co. Laois	Agriculture Forestry & Fishing	3,527	19.46%	2,604	11%
	Manufacturing	2,994	16.5%	3,311	14%
	Services	8,380	46%	13,608	57%
	Construction	1,132	7%	2,628	11%
Leinster	Agriculture Forestry & Fishing	41,372	5.8%	31,795	3.5%
	Manufacturing	126,503	17.7%	119,889	13%
	Services	404,172	56.5%	614,942	67%
	Construction	45,499	6.4%	77,271	8.4%
Ireland	Agriculture Forestry & Fishing	133,969	10.2%	97,281	5.9%
	Manufacturing	249,131	19%	244,203	15%
	Services	669,907	51%	1,031,283	63%
	Construction	87,452	6.7%	149,271	9%

Source: CSO, Ireland

- 4.9 In 1996, almost 20% of the labour force in Co. Laois was engaged in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector. By 2002 this had reduced to almost 11%, a drop of nearly 100%. The decline in manufacturing employment as a proportion of the labour force was somewhat less dramatic. From 16.5% in 1996, it fell to 14%, 6 years later. During the same time, employment in the services sector rose from 46% to 57%.
- 4.10 For comparative purposes, the respective figures at the national level are as follows:
- Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing from 10.2% in 1996 to 5.9% in 2002;
 - Manufacturing from 19% in 1996 to 15% in 2002;
 - Services from 51.24% in 1996 to 62.8% in 2002.
- 4.11 Employment in IDA backed companies in Co. Laois totals approx. 270.

Agriculture

- 4.12 A relatively high proportion of the county's population (almost double the national average) is still involved in agricultural and related activities. The CAP reform decisions introduced by the E.U. in 2003 may have major implications in relation to participation in agricultural activities during the Development Plan period. Decoupling is likely to accelerate the restructuring of farm production to be more market orientated, to introduce a range of environmental standards such as the Nitrates Directive, to encourage more farmers to participate in the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS) and to accelerate the decline in numbers associated with farm activities. It may also encourage the use of farmland for alternative activities.

Table 7: No. of Farms Classified by Farm Size at county, provincial and national level

Locus	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-50	50-100	100-200	200+	Total	Average Farm Size
Co. Laois	636	601	544	831	651	122	10	3,395	35.3
Leinster	6,617	6,654	5,523	7,979	6,850	1,678	283	35,584	37.8
Ireland	28,419	34,290	25,045	29,627	19,535	3,940	671	141,527	31.4

Source: CSO Census of Agriculture 2000

- 4.13 According to the 2000 census for agriculture, the average farm size in Co. Laois is 35.3 hectares, which is higher than the national average of 31.4 hectares, but lower than the provincial average of 37.8 hectares. There are 3,395 farms in Co. Laois of which 50% are less than 30 hectares in size. Furthermore, 52% of the land in the county is designated as disadvantaged.
- 4.14 Beef production is the predominant agricultural activity in Co. Laois, with 53% of the county's farmers engaged in this form of enterprise. A further 17% concentrate on specialist dairying and mixed grazing livestock and specialist tillage respectively. Notwithstanding its relatively small size, some specialist areas in agricultural practices are apparent throughout the County. In particular, tillage farming is most common in the east and north near the Kildare and Carlow borders.
- 4.15 In terms of age, 39% of farmers in Co. Laois are aged 55 years and over. While this percentage is declining it is still regarded as an obstacle to efforts aimed at the further commercialisation of agriculture.
- 4.16 The composition of farm household income is changing, making off-farm employment and the development of alternative enterprises necessary, to ensure survival. In this regard, for a significant number of farmers in Co. Laois (28%), farming is now regarded only as a part time or a subsidiary occupation.

EE1 **Agriculture**

It is the Policy of the Council;

- To encourage expansion and employment in the agricultural sector and the agricultural related industries such as forestry, peatlands, agri tourism etc;
- To liaise and work with the other agencies such as Leader, County Enterprise Group, Farming organizations, Voluntary Groups and Community Forum to develop economic social and physical benefits for the rural community and its service base;
- To ensure that buildings in visually sensitive areas address the surroundings;
- To ensure that landspreading of waste does not contaminate ground and surface water;
- That intensive agricultural developments are designed with due regard to environmental issues and Department of Agriculture guidelines;
- To maximize employment in local agriculture related industry such as forestry, wood processing and/or other value added enterprises;
- To have regard to National Policy guidelines for forestry development and to develop a County Strategy for the development of the Forestry Sector including the designation of areas considered suitable for this land use;
- To facilitate the development of farmers markets in appropriate locations in the county, in conjunction with Leader and other agencies;
- Ensure the protection of natural heritage of the county in particular the ecological integrity of designated areas (see Policy NH2), Waterways and wetlands (see Policy NH10), landscape and landscape features (see Policy NH12), and ground water protection (see Policy ENV2).

Afforestation

- 4.17 One alternative enterprise, which is proving attractive for an increasing number of farmers in Co. Laois, is afforestation. By 2001, 13.6% of Co. Laois was forested, comprising 4,430 hectares of private plantings and 15,950 hectares undertaken by Coillte. The bulk of the schemes to date have been in the upland, more marginal areas of the county, areas that often coincide with amenity designations and natural heritage areas. From an amenity perspective afforestation can have major negative implications for the visual amenities of the landscape.

FUTURE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOR THE COUNTY

Industry

- 4.18 The expression 'industry' includes manufacturing services and all activities associated with developing the national transport node and inland port.
- 4.19 In determining where industrial zonings should locate, the Council will have regard to the balanced development of the County to envisage an equal distribution of employment while having regard to the Councils Economic and Promotional Strategy.
- 4.20 The Council will also have regard to existing and proposed infrastructure provision, particularly transportation, within the county, so that infrastructure is used in an efficient manner and industrial land is properly serviced.
- 4.21 A hierarchy of zoned industrial land will be provided for different settlements. Industrial sites will be zoned and provision made for large scale enterprises at appropriate locations. The Council will encourage the development of private sector business parks and small Public Private Partnership (PPP) developments throughout the county.
- 4.22 A high standard of design will be pursued in Business Parks and industrial estates, particularly in the creation of soft and hard landscaping and overall design of the areas.

EE2 Industry

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Enhance and develop existing and proposed industrial areas through the provision of appropriate infrastructure and this will include the provision of sites for childcare facilities to serve the labour force;
- Encourage waste minimisation and recycling and to facilitate industry in this regard and ensure that industry complies with all appropriate legislation;
- Facilitate the provision of incubator/enterprise units for new enterprise units;
- Derelict sites which may be suitable for redevelopment will be identified and zoned where appropriate;
- Investigate the possibility of developing enterprise centres, in partnership with local community and private enterprise in Portarlinton, Portlaoise and Durrow. Other locations will be viewed on their merits and as the necessity arises;
- Support the development of enterprise space, where suitable proposal are made particularly in those towns subject to an area development plan;

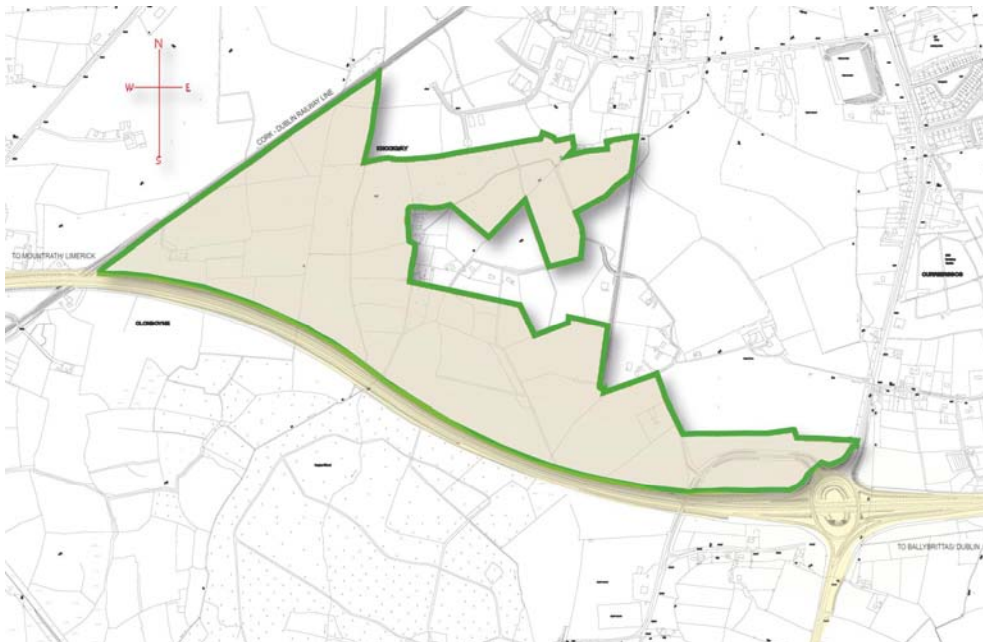
- Ensure that farmers who develop small industrial entrepreneurial businesses will be allowed to locate there on their own Lands subject to appropriate environmental controls;
- Ensure the protection of natural heritage of the county, in particular the ecological integrity of designated areas (see Policy NH2), Waterways and wetlands (see Policy NH10), landscape and landscape features (see Policy NH12), and ground water protection (see Policy ENV2), and
- It is recognized that priority is given to development of the Togher area in Portlaoise, however other areas of the County will be given consideration in responding to strategic enterprise and employment opportunities having regard to the proper planning and sustainable development and relevant development control standards.

4.23 In order to compete with the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) from a commercial and industrial point of view, it is important that the range of uses considered in the county town of Portlaoise be expanded to include new uses such as warehousing and freight distribution, motorway services, etc.

National Transport Node and Inland Port at Portlaoise Interchange

4.24 Land was identified during the period of the 2000 Laois County Development Plan for such development in the Togher area of Portlaoise. Zoning within this area caters for distribution, a limited amount of retail warehousing for bulky durable goods [as defined in Para 4.36 in Chapter 4 Enterprise and Employment], factory warehousing, showrooms, bus and coach stops, heliport, motorway services and industrial development, innovative/services park, opportunity sites and event centre. No development of a retail nature which would impact adversely on the town centre will be allowed.

Map 1.4.1: Strategic Development Opportunity National Transport Node and Inland Port at Portlaoise Interchange



EE3 National Transport Node and Inland Port at Portlaoise Interchange

It is the policy of the County Council to assess applications for the development of the site in according to whether proposals seek to achieve the following:

- the protection of features of natural heritage value;
- the protection of ground water resources;
- the protection of any features of geological or geomorphologic interest;
- the protection of any features of archaeological interest.

Retailing

4.25 The Retail Planning Guidelines (DOEHLG) require that retail strategies are prepared for Council functional areas. The strategies to be included in all development plans are to comprehensively address the following matters:

- confirm the retail hierarchy, the role of centres and the size of the main town centres (See Table 8);
- define the boundaries of the core shopping areas;
- identify the additional floor space requirements;
- prepare policies and action initiatives to encourage the improvement of town centres;
- identify the criteria for assessment of retail developments.

4.26 Laois County Council commissioned consultants to prepare the Laois Retail Strategy in 2003 The Retail Strategy forms the basis on which the Planning Authority will formulate appropriate development plan objectives and policies for retail development in its area and will be used in the determination of applications for planning permission. A review of the strategy will be completed as part of the preparation of the Local Area Plans for Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Mountmellick and Graiguecullen.

EE4 Retailing

It is the policy of the Council to have regard to the Retail Strategy adopted by Laois County Council in 2003 and any subsequent review and the Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities, in determining planning applications for retail development.

Table 8: Retail Hierarchy

COUNTY LAOIS RETAIL HIERARCHY	
RETAIL FUNCTION	CENTRE
Major TOWN CENTRES	Portlaoise
COUNTY TOWN CENTRES	Portarlinton Mountmellick Mountrath Abbeyleix Rathdowney Stradbally Durrow
DISTRICT CENTRE	Carlow Environs (Graiguecullen)
VIALLAGE CENTRES	Clonaslee Ballybrittas Rosenallis Camross Castletown Timahoe Ballyroan Ballylynan Arles Ballickmoyler Newtown Swan Ballinakill Ballacolla Cullahill Errill Borris in Ossory
NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRES	Kilminchy, Portlaoise Summerhill, Portlaoise

Source: Laois Retail Strategy 2003

- 4.27 The hierarchy is dominated by Portlaoise, which is identified as a Major Town Centre in recognition of its status as a principal shopping town in the Midlands Region. Portlaoise possesses the capacity to accommodate large retail warehousing proposals.

EE5 Primary Retail Centre

It is the policy of the Council to acknowledge the role of Portlaoise as the primary retail centre in the County and the focus for comparison retail development

- 4.28 There are 7 other settlements in County Laois, which warrant the status of being identified as County Town Centres, having regard to their size and the broader county function they perform. These centres are characterized by a mix of comparison and convenience shopping. Rapid growth rates suggest that there will be a requirement to continue to plan for retail growth, underpinning the commercial cores of these towns. Towns such as Portarlinton, Mountmellick and Rathdowney serve well defined catchments and it is important that they maintain their attractiveness as self sufficient towns by developing a range and quality of retail development in their town centres. These towns will be encouraged to improve the town centre retail function with particular emphasis on central retail expansion.
- 4.29 From Table 8, it can be seen that the next tier in the hierarchy is occupied by the Environs of Carlow (Graigue), which merit the classification of a District Centre on the basis of the high population growth experienced in recent years (almost 11% during the 1996-2002 period). This trend is likely to continue.

EE6 Town Centre

It is the policy of the Council to acknowledge the importance of town centres in providing a wide range of both convenience and comparison shopping close to significant centres of population

- 4.30 Outside of these centres, a range of smaller village centres can be identified, which function as retail centres for their immediate hinterlands. Although shopping in some of these villages is somewhat sparse, the capacity remains to create a level of critical retail provision.

EE7 Local Shops

It is the policy of the Council to acknowledge the importance of the local shop in meeting the local shopping needs

The Need for additional Floor space

- 4.31 Since the Retail Strategy was adopted in 2003 a number of large scale retail developments in the main County towns of Portlaoise and Portarlinton have been granted planning permission and some are at construction stage.
- 4.32 It is clear from the analysis that Portlaoise assumes a position of retail primacy in the County. Generally speaking, this primacy is a reflection of the modern trend for the concentration of retailing into larger centres that are able to sustain a critical mass of retailing. These centres have emerged from the increasing expansion of product lines by the retailers and the consumer demand for an extensive range and choice of shopping at any one given location.
- 4.33 This capacity is reflected in the appreciable number of applications for retail development in Portlaoise and Portarlinton and retail units at Graiguecullen, in the Environs of Carlow. On the basis of the projected population, expenditure and turnover figures, the scale of these proposals have already accounted for a significant amount of the excess capacity envisaged for the County up to the year 2008.
- 4.34 The capacity to develop new convenience floorspace in the towns in tier two is a reflection of the high level of leakage of convenience expenditure to other centres outside the County. This occurs principally in those outlying areas that are comparatively accessible to large retail towns such as Tullamore, Carlow, Kilkenny and Newbridge.
- 4.35 The additional floorspace projection for the comparison sector will be for retail warehousing and will be jointly consumed by the consolidation of existing centres and the creation of additional retail warehousing units at Togher.
- 4.36 Retail warehouses are large single level stores specializing in the sale of household goods and bulky items catering mainly for car borne customers. They have a minimum size of 700sq.m. It will be a requirement that the range of bulky goods sold be restricted to goods which include carpets, furniture, automotive products, white electrical goods and DIY items, garden material and office and industrial plant equipment but excluding the sale of goods which are not bulky such as food, clothing, toys, footwear, sportswear, computers and pet products, etc.

- 4.37 Originally linked to the conversion of redundant industrial premises, retail parks are the shopping equivalent of business parks and office parks. As in the case of the Kea Lew Retail Park in Portlaoise, their development is sometimes linked to the redevelopment of industrial premises. Although the main floorspace component to retail parks is retail warehousing, modern retail parks may also accommodate a mix of leisure and commercial uses including cinemas, fast food outlets, fitness centres, petrol filling stations travel accommodation and childcare facilities. The rationale and benefits of a mixed-use site relate to the synergy between the uses and the opportunities for shared trips.
- 4.38 In the main, retail parks are regarded as sound investment opportunities by developers because, unlike anchor stores in shopping centres which have a limited tenant base, they are flexible to lease and adaptable for subdivision and enlargement. Their growth shows a strong correlation with a buoyant housing market, as evidenced in Britain in the late 1980s and Ireland in the 1990s.

EE8 Retail Warehousing

Laois County Council will seek to achieve the following:

- Make provision for new retail warehouse development in accordance with the scale of provision as envisaged in the Retail Strategy 2003;
- Planning permission will be restricted to the range of goods referred to E436
- Subdivision of units less than 700sq.m. will not be permitted;

New Neighbourhood centres

- 4.39 Portlaoise and Portarlinton have experienced considerable growth over the past 10 years. The town centres have not or not been able to accommodate the needs of the substantial population increases resulting in congestion and overtrading.

EE9 District and Neighbourhood Centres

It is the Councils policy:

- To encourage and facilitate the development of appropriately located new district and neighbourhood centres to meet the needs of new centres of population;
- To identify and zone, in Local Area Plans, appropriate locations for new district and neighbourhood centres within large established residential areas and where large scale residential development is planned.

Discount Food store – These are defined as single level self-service store normally between 1,000 to 1,500 sq.m. of gross floor space selling a limited range of goods at competitive prices, with adjacent car parking. Discount food stores provide an alternative choice of retailing to the community. Their customer catchments and retail offer is different to the mainstream superstores and supermarkets and their trade draw will be different.

Assessing New Retail Developments:

- 4.40 Subject to the qualifying sizes above, applicants will be required to submit to the Planning authority sufficient information on which to effectively assess the proposal. In so doing, applicants will have to demonstrate how the proposal satisfies the following criteria as set out by the Retail Guidelines: -
- Complements or meets existing deficiencies in the overall shopping provision;
 - Supports the long term strategy for town centres as established in the Development Plan and not materially diminish the prospect of attracting private sector investment into one or more town centres;
 - Does not cause an adverse impact on one or more town centres, either singly or cumulatively with recent developments or other outstanding planning permissions, sufficient to undermine the quality of the centre or its role in the economic and social life of the community;
 - Does not diminish the range of activities and services that a town centre can support;
 - Ensures a high standard of access so that the proposal is easily accessible by all sections of society, especially the disabled;
 - Will not lead to an unreasonable or detrimental impact on amenity, traffic movements or road safety;
 - Will link effectively with an existing town centre so that there is likely to be commercial synergy;
 - Is to a higher standard of design, of both the buildings and the spaces around the buildings, which contributes positively to townscape and is sensitive to the surrounding area.
- 4.41 If the local authority may consider it necessary for applicants to prepare a Retail Impact Statement in order to fully address the requirements of the above criteria. The contents of the Retail Impact Statement should involve both a quantitative and qualitative assessment of the proposal.
- 4.42 A quantitative assessment should examine the capacity for additional retail build and should estimate the impact of the proposal on existing retail facilities. The qualitative assessment, should evaluate the merits of the proposal in respect of its ability to enhance the facilities available to the consumer and in terms of its capacity to add to the range and choice of goods on offer.

Monitoring and Review of the Retail Strategy

- 4.43 The Retail Planning Guidelines advise that the Planning Authorities monitor trends in their area and update retail policies if appropriate. A monitoring system will be put in place to ensure that the necessary amendments can be made.

Obsolete areas and Derelict Sites

- 4.44 The Council recognizes that certain lands become obsolete or derelict due to economic and social factors changing consumer trends, land title problems and future infrastructural plans etc. It considers that such areas detract from the urban landscape encourage further dereliction and dampens community initiative and participation and generally acts as an agent for disinvestment.
- 4.45 The Council proposes to actively identify these areas and target them for integrated and concerted public and community action to remedy the obsolescence and dereliction. The derelict sites register will be updated on an ongoing basis.

EE10 Obsolete and Derelict Sites

It is the Council policy to:

- To identify comprehensive schemes for development of obsolete and derelict areas;
- To embrace the participation of all interested parties in these schemes
- To capitalize on and utilize to the maximum possible extent the beneficial advantages of investment derived from National and EU funded schemes for renewal projects;
- To use the derelict sites register to acquire, eliminate or secure the development of derelict sites;
- To utilize where appropriate the requisite planning and environmental legislation in relation to obsolete areas, derelict sites and unauthorized development.

- 4.46 The Council recognises the importance of agriculture and agricultural related development to the economy of County Laois and its significant contribution to the social and physical fabric of the environment. The promotion of self sustaining rural communities is an integral part of development of the County and can be assisted by diversification of farming activities, opportunities for off farm employment, agri-tourism projects and afforestation. The existence of an urban settlement structure facilitates rural development by providing vibrant local service centres.
- 4.47 The Council's vision of rural areas will endeavour to regard the countryside as a dynamic entity not a static series of unchanging landscapes. To this end the Council will consider opportunities for suitable micro businesses in rural areas, subject to environmental constraints being taken into account and are suitably designed for the area in which they are to be located.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

- 4.48 The Council recognises the importance of a high quality telecommunication service in the context of national, regional and local development. The development of this service is an essential element in industrial, commercial, tourist and social development. The Planning and Development Regulations 2001 have provided exemption from the requirement to apply for planning permission, for antennae at certain locations.

Antennae Mast Structures

- 4.49 The erection of antennae mast structures are an essential part of developing the telecommunication service. The Council will encourage and facilitate pre-planning discussions in relation to applications for mast structures. The Council will take into account health and safety issues by ensuring compliance with International requirements for safe emission of radio waves as indicated by the Office of the Director of Telecommunications Regulations. The Council will also take into account guidelines issued by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DOEHLG) in relation to mast structures.

EE11 Telecommunications

It is the policy of the Council that:

- Masts and associated antennae will not generally be allowed to be constructed within 400 meters of any occupied dwelling, residential area, school, hospital, child-care centre or nursing home.
- Masts and antennae structures should shall be sited and designed to minimise the visual impact of the development and the landscape;
- Co-location and sharing of antennae structures will be encouraged;
- To prohibit any development that would impinge on public right of way;
- To grant temporary permissions (for periods of 5 years) for antennae support structures and masts;
- To protect the visual amenity of the surrounding area
- To ensure the provision of appropriate fencing and access roads to serve the development.

Broadband

- 4.50 The widespread availability of high speed affordable internet access referred to as Broadband, is central to the development of the Country as a knowledge and information society. Broadband services will reduce the peripherality of many communities and lead to improved employment opportunities it will enhance the sustainability of these communities and create a more positive environment for investment. Initially Broadband services were rolled out by private Broadband Internet service providers and these focused of cities and large towns. Broadband is also being made available in rural areas on wireless and microwave technology. This is part of a group Broadband Scheme initiated by the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources 2004.

EE12 Broadband

The Council will encourage and facilitate the extension of the Broadband system in the County.

E-Commerce

- 4.51 Electronic Commerce may be defined as the exchange of value over the electronic medium. The electronic medium is the internet, the wireless network used by mobile phones or the digital TV Network.
- 4.52 The uptake and impact of e-commerce has varied dramatically between industry sectors. However, in the future, almost every industry will be impacted, in some form, by E-Commerce.
- 4.53 E-Commerce will effectively mean accessing information and services from home, from the car or from the office.
- 4.54 The communications/electronic commerce sector is a key factor in continued economic development. It provides the basic infrastructure for new information communications and digital industries, it is altering the modus operandii of traditional industries, in the way in which work is organized and, the interaction between consumers and business.

EE13 ECommerce

Laois County Council will support and facilitate the provision of advanced communication networks and services so as to contribute to national competitiveness and attract inward investment and economic development.

TOURISM

EE14

Laois County Council supports the development of the tourism industry in the County.

- 4.55 County Laois is not a tourist destination for Irish or foreign tourists. This factored with a lack of future visitor attractions and a strong rural economy makes a viable tourist base hard to establish. The Midlands East Regional Tourism Authority (MERTA) 37,000 people visited County Laois in 2001. The County has many natural and heritage attractions such as demesne landscapes - Emo Court, Ballyfin, Vesey House, Abbeyleix/Mountain ranges such as - Slieve Bloom, Killeshin Plateau, Cullahill Mountains and historical landscapes such as Rock of Dunamaise, Heritage Gardens such as Heywood Demesne.

Conferences and Events

The Council will continue to support, well planned initiatives, in order to develop the County's potential as an event /concert destination.

EE15

It is the policy of County Laois to encourage the provision of such facilities in appropriate locations to make optimum use of the existing strategic location.

Rural Tourism

- 4.57 The annual gross value of rural tourism in Ireland is 114 million euro. According to Teagasc this figure has the potential to be doubled to 229 million euro over the next five years. Real opportunities exist for rural dwellers to generate additional income from rural tourist enterprises. Enterprises in this category usually concentrate on the provision of quality tourism products which are distinctively rural in character and can be promoted and sold as unique in the market places.

EE16 *Rural Tourism*

- It is the policy of the council to ensure that there is effective signposting and branding on national primary roads to maximise tourism potential of the county;
- It is the policy of the Council to promote sustainable tourism in a way that maintains and where possible enhance the quality of the rural landscapes and rural townscapes, the quality of natural and man made waterways, the county's scenic character, the archaeological and architectural heritage of the county.

- 4.58 One of the main tourism products in County Laois is the natural beauty of the Slieve Bloom Mountains. The mountains straddle the Laois/Offaly County boundary and a number of small towns and villages are well placed to take advantage of their locations as gateways to this natural resource. The development of the Slieve Bloom Way marked Ways offers a well designed recreational pursuit. However there is an identified need to complement the natural beauty with the provision of appropriate accommodation and food outlets for a range of needs such as coffee shops and high quality dining. This area has potential on the international market – particularly for walking holidays.

- 4.59 Maintaining the quality of the rural landscape and the urban environment are important. Waterways are also a major resource, which should be maintained and enhanced. The natural heritage and landscape of Laois, and the county's scenic character are vital assets for tourism as well as for recreation and amenity. Similarly, architectural and archaeological heritage is a valuable tourism and amenity resource. In developing these assets for the benefit of visitors and locals alike, it is important that they are managed sensitively, and that potential conflicts between the development and the conservation of such sites are recognised and addressed at an early stage.

EE17 Tourist Accommodation

It is the policy of the County Council to facilitate the development of complimentary accommodation and dining areas in appropriate locations taking into account design, scale and traffic and environmental considerations.

ARTS

- 4.60 Laois County Council is committed to developing the arts in the County. The fundamental principles underpinning the Councils approach shall be to encourage the community to support and engage with the Arts in County Laois. Furthermore the Council recognises the critical role that the Arts play in economic and social dynamism and the development of the Region.
- 4.61 Laois County Council are reviewing their 2001-2003 *The Arts in Laois Plan* which provides the context for the development and enhancement of the Arts and cultural sector in the County. County Laois is fortunate to have a well managed and accessible Theatre and Arts Centre – The Dunamase Arts Theatre and Centre are also preparing a development plan.

EE18 Arts policy

It is the policy of the Council to facilitate an environment for the arts – a priority being to create conditions, places within which the Arts can flourish

The Council will work with all relevant groups to ensure the access to and participation, the performing and visual arts is available to all its citizens.

Museums

Laois County Council is committed to the development of a sustainable County Museums Service in Laois, which takes into account the needs of residents and visitors and acknowledges and supports the excellent work being done throughout the county by private and community-run museums and heritage centres.

The Council will continue to develop a site for a County Museum.

EE19 County Museum

The Council fully supports the development of all museums in the County and continues to develop an appropriate site for the County Museum.