

CHAPTER 8 – NATURAL HERITAGE

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CHAPTER 8: NATURAL HERITAGE

AIM: To reinforce the distinctive character of County Laois through ensuring that sites and species of biodiversity importance are identified, conserved and managed appropriately.

Introduction

8.1 A rich diversity of flora, fauna and wildlife habitats make up the biodiversity of County Laois. Some sites have been designated by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Environment, Heritage and local Government as Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) or Special Areas for Conservation (SACs) as a result of their international and national wildlife importance. However, Laois County Council also recognises the integral value of locally important sites, and the wildlife and biodiversity of the wider countryside and acknowledges the importance of implementing policies to protect our entire natural heritage.

OBJECTIVES

It is the objective of Laois County Council to:

- Identify, protect and conserve sites of natural heritage importance, in co-operation with the relevant statutory authorities;
- Ensure that the provisions of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 are met, and
- Liaise with neighbouring counties to ensure that all natural resources, which cross county boundaries, are managed in a strategic and sustainable way.

Biodiversity Action Plan

8.2 Biodiversity is the variety of life, flora, fauna and wildlife habitats. A National Biodiversity Plan has been produced, which sets out aims for the conservation of Ireland's biodiversity. The National Biodiversity Plan (2002) requires local Authorities to prepare and implement Local Biodiversity Action Plans.

NH1 Biodiversity Plan

It is the policy of Laois County Council to:

Develop and implement a Local Biodiversity Action Plan for the County, through the Laois Heritage Forum.

Designated areas

8.3 Sites of national importance for wildlife are designated as Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) under the Irish Wildlife Act 2000. Sites of international conservation importance are designated Special Protection Areas (under the Birds Directive) or Special Areas for Conservation (under the Habitats Directive). Together, SPAs and SACs make up the Natura 2000 network of wildlife sites. The majority of these sites are in private ownership, and most are farmed.

8.4 Responsibility for location and designation of NHAs and Natura 2000 sites and subsequent production of Site Management Plans rests with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. However, the protection of these areas through the planning process and through the promotion of awareness and the collective concern of communities is the responsibility of Laois County Council.

NH2 Designated Areas

It is the Council policy to:

- Restrict development where it would significantly adversely affect any protected species or its habitat or proposed or designated Natural Heritage Area, Special Area for Conservation or Special Protection Area, Statutory Nature Reserve, RAMSAR Site or Biogenetic Reserve, unless an overriding national need for the development can be shown to outweigh the site's ecological interest and there is no other less ecologically important site available for the development.
- Restrict development where it would significantly adversely affect any landscape feature of importance to wild flora and fauna by reason of its continuous nature or function as a stepping stone between habitats unless an overriding national or local need can be shown to outweigh the ecological interest.

NH3 Consultation

Laois County Council will consult with appropriate prescribed bodies, particularly the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, when assessing applications for planning in or adjacent to areas designated or proposed for designation for their biodiversity or geological importance (NHAs, SACs) and will have due regard to the recommendations of the prescribed bodies. Laois County Council will encourage awareness in the heritage of Laois by collecting and disseminating information, and by promoting access to heritage sites where appropriate.

Table 12: Special Areas for Conservation (SACs) in County Laois (as identified on the accompanying Map No.1.81)

Site Name	Site Code
River Barrow And River Nore	002162
Clonaslee Eskers and Derry Bog	000859
Lisbigney Bog	000869
Mountmellick	002141
Slieve Bloom Mountains	000412
Coolrain Bog	002332
Knockacollier Bog	002333

Table 13: Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) in Co Laois (as identified on the accompanying Map No.1.82)

Site Name	Site Code	Main habitat or species
Annaghmore Lough Fen	000413	Calcareous fen with willow and birch scrub
Ballylynan	000857	Grassland, wet meadows
Barrow Valley at Tankardstown Bridge	000858	River, canal, grassland, marsh
Clonaslee Eskers And Derry Bog	000859	Esker, raised bog
Clonreher Bog	2357	Raised bog
Cloppook Wood	000860	Ash/hazel woodland, limestone hill
Coolacurragh Wood	000862	Birch/alder woodland, fen peat

Site Name	Site Code	Main habitat or species
Coolrain Bog	000415	Midland raised bog (with Knockacollier Bog, these two bogs are the most southerly intact examples of true Midland Raised Bogs in the country)
Cuffsborough	000418	Grassland used by Greenland White-fronted geese
The Curragh And Goul River Marsh	000420	Wet meadow, river, winter feeding site for Greenland White-fronted Geese
Delour River Nr Lacca Manor	000864	Oak/birch woodland, river, wet grassland
Derries Wood	000416	Disturbed raised bog, disused gravel pit, conifer plantation, lake, reedbed, important insect populations
Dunamaise Woods	001494	Limestone hills, oak/ash woodland
Emo Court	000865	Semi-natural mixed (oak/ash with beech) woodland, lake, parkland, amenity grassland
Forest House Wood	000874	
Grand Canal	002104	Canal, wetland, grassland
Grantstown Wood and Lough	000417	State-owned nature reserve. Lake in transition through fen to alder/willow carr. Important invertebrate fauna
Kilteale Hill	000867	Limestone hill, hazel/ash woodland
Knockacollier Bog	000419	Midland raised bog, Birch and alder woodland. One of the few intact bogs south of the Slieve Blooms
Lisbigney Bog	000869	Raised bog
Mannin Wetland	00868	Species-rich fen
Monaincha Bog/ Ballaghmore Bog	00652	Raised bog
Ridge Of Portlaoise	000876	Esker ridge, ash/hazel woodland, species-rich grassland, disused gravel pits
River Barrow And River Nore	002162	River, wetland, woodland
River Nore/Abbeyleix Woods Complex	002076	River, site for Freshwater Pearl Mussel (international importance), Twaite Shad (Vulnerable), wet grassland, mixed deciduous woodland of great antiquity and species diversity, with specimen oak
Rock of Dunamaise	000878	
Shanahoe Marsh	001923	
Slieve Bloom Mountains	000412	Old Red Sandstone mountains, mountain blanket bog, Peregrine Falcon, Hen harrier, red grouse
Stradbally Hill	001800	
Timahoe Esker	000421	Esker ridge, Hazel/Ash woodland

Biodiversity in the Wider Countryside

8.4 It is important to realise that the biodiversity of County Laois is not contained within designated areas alone. There is a need to conserve wildlife species and habitats in the wider countryside throughout County Laois.

NH4 Local Nature Reserves

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Encourage local nature reserves.

The Council supports the development of local nature reserves, for example, in partnership with local landowners and communities.

NH5 Biodiversity in the Wider Countryside

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Promote the conservation of biodiversity outside of designated areas, including features such as wetlands, woodlands, hedgerows, and uplands, and
- Support national agencies and local groups in the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity in the wider countryside, particularly through schemes such as the Rural Environment Protection Scheme, which contains substantial measures to conserve and enhance biodiversity on farmland.

8.6 The Council shall seek to identify, protect and conserve vulnerable, rare and threatened species of wild fauna and flora and their habitats with particular reference to those species identified in national and European legislation and in other International conventions, Agreements and Processes.

8.7 The Council shall seek to co-operate with statutory and other relevant agencies to identify and protect, a representative sample, of the county's wildlife habitats of local or regional importance, not otherwise protected by legislation. In addition, the Council will seek to protect and enhance important landscape features including rivers, streams, canals, lakes, and associated wetlands such as reedbeds and swamps; ponds, springs, bogs, fens, trees, woodlands and scrub, hedgerows and other boundary types such as stone walls and ditches. These are important because:

- They form part of a network of habitats, corridors and stepping stones essential for wildlife to flourish, thus providing a high quality natural environment for all;
- They protect and enhance surface water and ground water resources and are essential as part of the integrated approach to the management of water resources, necessary to ensure the highest water quality into the future, as set out in the Water Framework Directive (Directive 2000/60/EC establishing a framework for community action in the field of water policy); and
- They improve the quality of the landscape.

NH6 Plans and Programmes

It is the Council policy to:

- Take into account and Implement the plans and programmes that have been identified in the Laois Heritage Plan.

Woodlands and Trees

8.8 Woodlands and individual trees make an enormous contribution to the landscape, beauty and natural heritage of Laois such as the Millennium Park Lacca, in the Slieve Blooms.

NH7 Woodlands and Trees

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Maintain and enhance the natural heritage and amenity of the County, by promoting the preservation and enhancement of native and semi-natural woodlands, groups of trees and individual trees.

8.9 Tree Protection Orders (TPOs) will be used as appropriate to protect individual trees or groups of trees of unique or special character. Laois County Council will promote the planting of native tree and shrub species, by committing to using native species wherever possible in its landscaping work and on County Council property.

8.10 It is a specific objective of the Council to protect the following important stands of trees:

Table 14: Significant Groups of Trees

LOCATION
Brittas House Clonalsee
Rock of Dunamaise
Abbeyleix Demesne
Ballyfin College
Emo Court
Ballinakill Lodge
Corrig Wood
Grantsown Lake
Lacca (Millennium Park)
Baunreagh Slieve Blooms
Glendine

NH8 Trees

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Provide advice through the Laois Heritage Office on the value of native species, and the care and management of trees and hedgerows in urban and rural areas.

Hedgerows

8.11 Laois County Council recognises the importance of hedgerows in terms of both ecological and visual amenity throughout Laois. There will be a presumption against removal of hedgerows during developments, and where removal is necessary, that planting of an equivalent length of native hedgerow will be required as a condition of planning.

NH9 Hedgerows

It is Council policy to:

- Protect and preserve existing hedgerows and to encourage planting of native hedgerow species;
- Require that hedgerows and other distinctive boundary treatments such as stone walls be retained as far as possible in rural areas. However front boundary treatments may be required to be set back over the full frontage of the site where it is necessary to ensure safe entry and exit from a site and/or if it is necessary to facilitate road realignment anticipated to take place within a reasonable period of time. The length involved will be minimised and the provision of a similar type of boundary such as a masonry wall or native species hedge will be required, and
- Ensure that the provisions of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 in relation to the cutting of hedgerows are strictly upheld, and that hedgerows are not cut in the bird nesting season (between March and September).

Waterways and Wetlands

8.12 The waterways and wetlands of Laois are of great importance, both as an amenity resource and a wildlife habitat. Waterway corridors and floodplain areas will be protected through

development control. Public access to and understanding of sites of amenity value will be encouraged.

NH10 Waterways and Wetlands

Rivers should be the subject of special attention to ensure that their habitats for fish and other wildlife are preserved and enhanced, especially the River Barrow and River Nore. This will be achieved in co-operation with the Barrow Drainage Board, Waterways Ireland, Southern Regional Fisheries Board, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, local farmers, angling clubs and other stakeholders.

It is the Council's policy to

- Protect the ecological integrity, quality and character of the waterways, wetlands and sections of canal in County Laois;
- Recognise the special importance of County Laois to freshwater species such as the Freshwater Pearl Mussel, and will work to protect these key species and the habitats on which they depend;
- Protect and enhance views to and from waterways corridors, including views from bridges;
- Provide or support the development of walkways and cycleways along waterway corridors;
- Liaise with the National Parks and Wildlife Service and local groups to ensure conservation of and access to wetlands and waterways in the County;
- To support access to and enjoyment of the lakes of Laois by local communities and visitors, and
- Protect and enhance the unique character and appearance of the waterways and wetlands of Laois, by controlling development adjacent to both navigable and non-navigable waterways and to ensure adequate drainage of rivers in harmony with environmental factors to ensure that no unnecessary flooding occurs in the county.

Peatlands

8.13 Laois contains a range of high quality peatland habitats. Although many of these have been affected by drainage and extraction, the County still contains a number of excellent examples of both Raised and Blanket bog habitats.

NH11 Peatlands

It is the Council's policy to:

- Ensure that peatland areas which have been designated (or proposed for designation) as NHAs or SACs are conserved and managed appropriately.

Landscape

8.14 The landscape of the county is characterised, in general by rolling countryside, interspersed with low-lying areas. The landscape lacks the dramatic impact of some of the western and northern counties, however it makes a subtle statement of its own. The physical landscape consists of the Slieve Blooms in the northwest of the county, the rolling landscape of the eastern part, the Killeshin plateau in the southeast, Cullahill Mountain in the south west and the lower lands in the west. Interspersed amongst these are areas of lowlands and bog. The landscape of any area is influenced and shaped by the activities, which take place within it. In this respect, tillage lands to the east and grazing lands to the west, have influenced the landscape of the county to a large degree.

8.15 The landscape has also been shaped and influenced by historical events – from the fortifications at the Rock of Dunamais, to the grandeur of Emo Court. The county has a rich

historical and archaeological heritage, which is evident in all parts of the county. The 'Inventory of Archaeological Heritage' prepared by Duchas 2002 lists over 650 items, which is testimony to that heritage and is referred to in Chapter 9 – Built Heritage and Urban Design.

- 8.16 Modern day developments are continuing to shape the landscape. The changes in agricultural activity, the R.E.P's scheme, sheep farming, and the advent of new mechanised methods of working and European policies are beginning to take their effect.
- 8.17 The growth in development over the past decade has created a demand for more houses and a large proportion of these are built in rural areas. Changes in design trends have moved from the more traditional design of dwelling to design features which are sometimes imported from abroad. Changes in building materials e.g. insulation, allows for the erection of houses in locations where they are more exposed to the elements. In this regard, houses were traditionally built in sheltered areas, where they were less exposed to the elements.
- 8.18 Pressure of development from the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) and Co. Kildare has been evident particularly in the east of the County. In addition to increasing site cost for local people this is having an effect on the landscape. More and larger houses are being constructed as a result of this development pressure.
- 8.19 The landscape has a limited capacity to absorb different types of development such as the erection of telecommunication infrastructure, wind farm developments in upland areas and large scale afforestation. In achieving balanced sustainable growth, regard must be had to this capacity and the impact on the landscape. In this regard, the Council have identified areas of the County where particular care must be taken in dealing with development proposals – Special Areas for Development Control. This is necessary to protect the integrity of the landscape of the County.

NH12 Landscape

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Protect and enhance the county's landscape by ensuring that development retains, protects and where necessary enhances the appearance and character of the existing local landscape;
- Identify, protect and enhance landscapes and landscape features of special environmental, archaeological, historic or cultural interest;
- Identify and protect areas of high amenity which warrant designation as Landscape Conservation Areas. These include: the Slieve Blooms, Nore and Barrow Valleys, Grand Canal area, Heath-Dunamase area, and areas around demesne estates at Abbeyleix, Stradbally, Ballyfin, Emo, and Heywood.
- Protect and enhance the county's landscape and landscape features including geological and geomorphological features such as eskers, by ensuring that development retains, protects and where necessary enhances the appearance and character of the landscape and/or landscape features

Developments must be appropriate to the landscape character/type within which it is situated and contribute to its conservation, enhancement or restoration or the creation of new features. All proposals will be addressed in relation to the following:

- Local attractiveness and character
- The condition of the landscape
- Visual intrusion – direct and cumulative
- Layout and scale of buildings and designated spaces
- Quality and character of the built fabric

- Public access and community value of the landscape
 - Historic patterns and attributes of the landscape
 - Landscape biodiversity and ecological networks
 - Semi natural habitats characteristics of the landscape type
 - Remoteness and tranquillity
 - Noise and light pollution.
- 8.20 A strategic plan for the Slieve Blooms was drawn up in co-operation with Offaly County Council in 1995. This plan will be reviewed and updated, to ensure that it addresses all of the major issues facing communities in the Slieve Blooms in the 21st century.
- 8.21 This will involve an integrated plan for the Slieve Blooms, which will maintain areas of ecological significance, identify areas for broadleaf forestry plantation, maintain important views and prospects support and maintain the indigenous population, and promote desirable recreational use such as hill-walking and designated bridle paths.
- 8.22 There will be a presumption against wind farm development in the Slieve Blooms. Promotion of special interest tourism (e.g. equestrian, hill-walking) in the Slieve Blooms depends on the maintenance of the high quality of the environment in this area. This will necessitate a strategic vision with regard to forestry, protection of open views and prospects and other development.

Heritage Gardens & Parks

- 8.23 County Laois is fortunate to have a number of high quality heritage gardens and parkland areas, in both private and State ownership.

NH13 Heritage Gardens and Parks

The Council will co-operate with the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and other interested groups to facilitate the protection, promotion and enhancement of heritage gardens and parks in the county and will support public awareness and enjoyment of and access to these sites.

Forestry

- 8.24 Forestry has economic and recreational potential in County Laois. However, inappropriately located forestry can have significant adverse environmental impacts. Forestry can be encouraged in suitable areas subject to such development not causing negative environmental impacts, interfering with significant views, prospects and rights of ways. Forestry development should avoid areas designated for their wildlife or archaeological importance, and should not be obtrusive in the landscape.

NH14 Forestry

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Support the development of an Indicative Forestry Strategy for County Laois, in order to plan sustainable forestry development into the future;
- Direct inappropriate single species forestry away from sensitive sites of built and natural heritage importance and from sensitive landscapes, such as the Slieve Blooms;
- Co-operate with Coillte in promoting access to and recreational use of State-owned forests. Support public enjoyment of and access to these sites. Work to ensure that felling in amenity forests is carried out with the sensitivity of scenic areas in mind, and
- Promote the planting of native deciduous trees and mixed forestry, in order to benefit biodiversity.

Amenity Views and Prospects

8.25 It is the Council's objective to preserve, improve and open up areas from which views or prospects of special amenity value can be enjoyed. In general, developments which would interfere with these views or prospects will be restricted.

NH15 Amenity Views and Prospects

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Undertake an assessment of amenity views and prospects to identify and delineate views of specific importance, and
- Protect views into and out of areas of significant amenity, and views and prospects, which significantly contribute to the character and amenity of the County and both the natural and built heritage.

There will be a presumption against development which would materially affect these amenity views and prospects.

Table 15: VIEWS AND PROSPECTS WORTHY OF PRESERVATION

LOCATION
Killeshin/Rossmore
The Windy Gap
Aharney
Slieve Bloom Mountains
Rock of Dunamaise
Grange, Mountmellick
The Heath
Raheen
Kilamuck
Raheenleagh
Castletown
Clonaslee

Special Areas of Development Control

8.26 There are areas in need of special protection due to their sensitive character and these areas have been identified as Special Areas of Development Control. In general they overlap with NHA and SAC designation, however, some of the areas lie outside of these designations but warrant special consideration due to their visual amenity.

The following areas are Special Areas of Development Control:

- Slieve Blooms
- Rock of Dunamaise
- Killeshin Plateau
- Aharney / Cullahill Mountain

- The Heath
- The Windy Gap / Luggacurren

There will be a general presumption against development in Special Areas of Development Control unless it can be demonstrated by means of a landscape assessment and appropriate landscape and building design proposals that the proposed development will enhance the overall landscape character of the site and its visual context. The onus will be on the applicant to ensure that the proposed development is integrated sensitively into the existing landscape.

NH16 Special Areas of Development Control

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Prohibit visually obtrusive development in Special Areas of Development Control.

Cross-border sites

8.27 Like all Midland counties, much of the heritage of Laois is shared with adjoining counties. The Slieve Blooms to the Northwest of the County are shared with County Offaly. The Rivers Barrow and Nore flow through Counties Offaly, Kildare, Laois, Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary, Wexford and Waterford. A number of the smaller rivers of Laois also flow through other neighbouring counties.

8.28 The management, sustainable development and conservation of these sites and rivers depend on close co-operation between the relevant authorities. It is important to ensure that developments which may benefit one county are not permitted to go ahead to the detriment of another. An example of this may be over-abstraction of a Laois river by a Local Authority downstream, which benefits the downstream population, to the detriment of the Laois portion of the river.

NH17 Cross Border Sites

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Co-operate with Local Authorities and other agencies in relation to cross-border sites and waterways, to ensure a coherent and strategic approach to their sustainable development and conservation.

Public Rights of Way

8.29 As the population of the County grows, and as people have become more aware of the importance of our built and natural heritage, the issue of access to the countryside and to heritage sites has become increasingly important. The formal process for designating rights of way is dealt with in Section 14 of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

NH18 Public Rights of Way

It is the policy of the Council to:

- Protect and maintain existing public rights of way in Laois, and investigate the development of new public rights of way, and designate where appropriate in consultation with landowners.

NH19 Flora and Fauna

It is the policy of the Council to:

- It is the Council's Policy to ensure the protection of species of flora and fauna afforded legal protection under Irish and European Legislation.