

Comhairle Chontae Laoise

Laois County Council



Tuarascáil Bhliantúil 2015

Annual Report 2015

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We are pleased to be associated with the presentation of the Annual Report for 2015. Laois County Council continues to fulfil its role in representing, leading and serving local communities and is committed to working in partnership with the people of County Laois within the financial resources available.

The Council continues to support community groups who give of their time to make the county an attractive place. It was inspirational to see Abbeyleix achieving gold medal status in the 2015 Tidy Towns Competition while Ballacolla, Castletown and Portlaoise achieved silver medal status with Clonsalee achieving bronze medal status. Gratitude is extended to all those who worked so hard to achieve these awards and to enhance the physical appearance of their local areas.

Throughout 2015 Laois County Council continued to promote the economic development of our County. Actions undertaken in support of the economic development are compatible with the objectives of the County Development Plan 2011- 2017. The Council recognises the importance of business to the local economy and the need to provide ongoing support to business and enterprise. The Council introduced the Shop Front Grants Scheme as a pilot project in 2015, continued to support the Portlaoise and Portarlington Enterprise Centres and an improvement plan for Clonminam Business Park was also progressed. The Local Enterprise Office Laois also had a very productive year with grant aid of €251,825 approved with potential to create thirty three full time jobs during the year and sustain a further twenty jobs.

Developing and promoting tourism and hospitality in County Laois continued as a priority for the Council. The County's range of festivals make for a unique visitor experience. Festivals such as the "Electric Picnic" in Stradbally and "Bare in the Woods" attracted many thousands of visitors in 2015.

A number of road improvements were carried out during the year including the construction of roundabouts at four junctions in Portlaoise. These works will increase traffic capacity, lessen delays and provide a safer environment for pedestrian and cyclists in Portlaoise. An extensive village enhancement programme for Durrow was also completed in 2015 and significantly, work commenced on the construction of the Carlow Northern Relief Road extension at Crosneen.

Work also commenced on Portarlington Library in 2015. This library caters for the growing population of Portarlington and its surrounding area. It will offer a state of the art facility for the community. Contracts for the acquisition of the old Shaws premises on Main Street were signed and this will be the location for the new library in Portlaoise. The library service provides an essential role in our community facilitating access to knowledge, lifelong learning and leisure reading. This facility together with our other libraries when completed will enrich the day to day lives of the people we serve.

The future looks bright for County Laois with its vibrant communities and renewed focus on economic development, enterprise and tourism. We are looking forward to the challenges ahead and we invite people to get involved and work with us to drive the social and economic growth of the County.

The achievements outlined in this Annual Report could not have been accomplished without the dedication and hard work of all the Elected Members, staff, committees and individuals who work with our Local Authority to progress the development of the County of Laois.



*John Mulholland
Chief Executive*



*Cllr. Catherine Fitzgerald
Cathaoirleach*

MISSION STATEMENT

“The Council will lead the sustainable economic, social, cultural and community development of our County and deliver quality public services to the communities we serve”

Mandate

Laois County Council is the Primary Democratically Elected Authority in County Laois. Laois County Council provides an extensive and diverse range of services which impact upon the county's economic, social, environmental, infrastructural, industrial, tourism, and cultural activities. These services include the provision and maintenance of houses, roads, water supplies and sewerage schemes (within the Service Level Agreement under Irish Water), planning and economic development, waste management, environmental protection, recreational activities, libraries, cultural and community development, including recreation and sport. The Council is serviced by a large workforce, including the Chief Executive, professional, technical, legal, administrative, financial and outdoor employees.

Council Membership

Laois County Council consists of 19 Elected Members - six members each from the Borris-in-Ossory-Mountmellick and Graiguecullen-Portarlinton Municipal Districts and seven members from the Portlaoise Municipal District.



Elected Members with the County Manager at Laois County Council AGM in June, 2014

Council Meetings

Council Meetings in 2015 were usually held on the last Monday of each month in the Council Chamber at Áras an Chontae. There were eighteen meetings held in 2015 with no meeting held in August.

Corporate Policy Group (C.P.G.)

The Corporate Policy Group is designed to enhance the democratic mandate and policy making role of the elected members. The C.P.G. is supported by the Chief Executive and comprises the Cathaoirleach of the Council and the four Chairs of the Strategic Policy Committees (S.P.C.'s). The main function of the C.P.G. is to co-ordinate the work of the different S.P.C.'s and provide a forum where policy decisions affecting the whole Council are agreed for submission to the full Council for decision. The C.P.G. met on 11 occasions in 2015.

Municipal Districts

The following are the details in relation to the number of Municipal District Meetings held in 2015:

Borris-in-Ossory/Mountmellick Municipal District - 10 meetings

Graiguecullen/Portarlinton Municipal District - 12 meetings

Portlaoise Municipal District - 13 meetings

MEMBERS OF LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL

The following Members were elected to Laois County Council at the Local Elections held on 23rd May 2014

MEMBERS OF BORRIS IN OSSORY-MOUNTMELICK MUNICIPAL DISTRICT



Patrick
Bracken
(F.F.)



John
King
(F.G.)



Brendan
Phelan
(Non-Party)



David
Goodwin
(F.G.)



Seamus
McDonald
(F.F.)



James
Kelly
(Non Party)

MEMBERS OF PORTLAOISE MUNICIPAL DISTRICT



Mary
Sweeney
(F.G.)



John Joe
Fennelly
(F.F.)



William
Aird
(F.G.)



Jeremiah
Lodge
(F.F.)



Catherine
Fitzgerald
(F.F.)



Caroline
DwaneStanley
(S.F.)



Noel
Tuohy
(Labour)

MEMBERS OF PORTARLINGTON-GRAIGUECULLEN MUNICIPAL DISTRICT



Tom
Mulhall
(F.G.)



John Robert
Moran
(F.G.)



Padraig
Fleming
(F.F.)



Ben
Brennan
(Non Party)



Aidan
Mullins
(S.F.)



Paschal
McEvoy
(F.F.)

Director of Services: Anna Marie Delaney

Senior Executive Officer

Human Resources: Carmel McNicholl

CORPORATE AFFAIRS

Corporate Plan

Laois County Council's Corporate Plan 2014 – 2019 was adopted by the Members of the Council in December, 2014.

The Corporate Plan provided the framework for the implementation of a coherent strategy for the development of the county for the period 2014-2019 and was prepared following consultation with employees, elected representatives, community, voluntary and environmental interests, external stakeholders and other public bodies operating at local level.

An update on the implementation of the Corporate Plan was considered by the Elected Members at their meeting held in January 2015.

Customer Charter

Laois County Council's Customer Charter sets out the way in which the Council endeavours to deal with its customers. The document is on display in all public Council Offices and on our website at www.laois.ie. This Charter includes a commitment to equality in service provision and a recognition of the diverse nature of the community we serve. The Charter also includes a Customer Complaints Procedure which may be availed of by any person not satisfied with the quality of service received.

Highlight

- 5th March 2015 - Cathaoirleach's Reception in honour of Jamie Boyle and Róisín Dunne, Intel Mini Scientist All-Ireland Champions 2015
- 26th March 2015 - Cathaoirleach's Reception in honour of the 25th Anniversary of the Mountmellick Drama Festival
- 9th April 2015 - Cathaoirleach's Reception in honour of Mary Doyle in recognition of her Golfing Achievements
- 11th June 2015 - Cathaoirleach's Reception to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the 1915 All Ireland Hurling Final Victory by Laois

- 16th June 2015 - Cathaoirleach's Reception in honour of Jimmy Hayes and Mountrath Table Tennis Club in recognition of their achievements in Table Tennis
- 16th September 2015 - Cathaoirleach's Reception in honour of Michael O'Reilly, Portlaoise Boxing Club, Winner of the Middleweight Gold Medal at the European Olympic Games Championships
- 13th November 2015 - Cathaoirleach's Reception in honour of the Laois Senior Camogie Team, Winners of the All Ireland Junior Premier Camogie Title 2015



Irish Language Scheme

Laois Local Authorities Irish Language Scheme was confirmed by the Minister for Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and came into effect on 1st December, 2009. The scheme is available to view on our website, www.laois.ie. A new scheme is being prepared.

Laois Local Authorities recognise that our customers have the right to choose to do business with us in their preferred language and they are facilitated in their dealings with us as far as practicable, whether that is through Irish or through English.

One of the main objectives of this Language Scheme was to ensure that higher standards of public services are available through the Irish Language as the national language and the first official language of the country.

If you wish to contact the Council in Irish, please send an e-mail to gaeilge@laoiscoco.ie.

Higher Education Grants

In 2015, a total number of 89 renewal applications

were approved for grant assistance.

The total amount paid out in 2015 in respect of Higher Education Grants was €614,783

Health & Safety

Health & Safety Officer: Jim Bolger

Enhancement of our Safety Management System (SMS) continued by the ongoing implementation of cross-directorate safety inspection programmes serving to further develop and build on our related 'evidence base'. In addition, a safety auditing programme commenced. This was mirrored in our water services department through Irish Waters Health, Safety Quality and Environmental (HSQE) auditing programme.

Meeting our obligations relative to statutory safety training was prioritised. Examples of this were the roll out of our continued in-house manual handling training programme and the provision of safe pass training as appropriate. The ongoing recruitment of employees to the 'Mypay' section ensured the need to provide ongoing safety induction training along with the Gateway cohort who were also provided with additional task specific safety training.

Keeping abreast of legislative developments was achieved by accessing our legal database which is available to all employees that have intranet access.

Finally, our inoculation programme was implemented and monitored as appropriate.

Partnership

The following were the members of the Workplace Partnership Committee as at 31st December, 2015.

Management Nominees

Kieran Kehoe
(Joint Chair)

Michael Rainey
Bernie Foran
Michael O'Hora
Geraldine Dunne

Union Nominees

Anne Marie Maher/
Tom O'Carroll (Joint
Chair shared)
Tom Saunders
Bernie Kilbride
Finbarr Dunphy

The Partnership Committee held 6 meetings during 2015.

Freedom of Information (F.O.I.)

The Freedom of Information Act 2014 was enacted on 14 October 2014. It introduced significant changes to

the Freedom of Information regime repealing and replacing the Freedom of Information Acts 1997 and 2003 and expanding the scope of FOI to a number of further bodies. It also consolidated, modernised and updated the legislation generally.

Applications received/processed in 2015

Applications on hand at 31/12/2014	0
Applications received during 2015	66
Decisions taken during 2015	59
Applications Withdrawn	04
Applications withdrawn and dealt with outside FOI	0
Applications on hand at 31/12/2015	3

Nature of Information Sought

Personal (to applicant)	10
Non-personal	52

Appeals

There were no appeals to the Information Commissioner in 2015.

Source of Requests

General Public	28
Journalists	23
Solicitors	9
Others	2

Performance Indicators

Section 126c of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 sets out the functions of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) which includes examination of the performance of local government bodies against thirty five indicators.

The report in respect of 2014 was published by NOAC in December 2015.

Laois County Council's performance in each area in 2014 is included in this report in each of the relevant sections.

Register of Electors

The Council is responsible for the compilation of the Register of Electors for County Laois which comes into force on 15th February each year. To be eligible for inclusion in the Register of Electors, you must be at least 18 years of age on the day that the Register comes into force and you must have been ordinarily resident in a Constituency on the 1st September preceding the coming into force of the Register.

Register of Electors 2016/2017

Dáil Constituency	Presidential Electors	Dáil Electors
Laois	57,075	57,861
European Parliament Constituency	European Electors	Potential European Electors
Midlands-North-West	58,583	600
Local Electoral Areas	Number of Electors	Postal and Special Voters
Borris In Ossory - Mountmellick	19,861	Gardaí 2
Graiguescullen - Portarlinton	19,672	Defence Forces 210
Portlaoise	<u>20,860</u>	Diplomats 2
Total:	60,393	Physically Disabled 24
		Occupation 3
		Special Voters 41

HUMAN RESOURCES

Recruitment Statistics

A total of 472 people were employed by Laois County Council at 31st December 2015.

The new national local authority shared services centre MyPay, based in Áras an Chontae, began operation in October 2013. Since that time a recruitment process has been underway and a number of posts have been filled through redeployment and open competition, for which sanction was received from Local Government Personnel, Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. This is reflected in the increase in numbers employed by Laois County Council for 2015.

During 2015 Laois County Council held 27 competitions, in relation to which the following statistics have been extracted:

Total Applications received	902	
	Male	Female
Applicants	333	569
Successful Applicants	89	121
Permanent Appointments/Promotions 2015		
	Male	Female
Appointments	17	25
Promotions	3	13

These figures do not include posts filled through redeployment in accordance with the Public Sector Agreements or competitions held by the Public Appointments Service.

Work Life Balance Initiatives

Laois County Council continued to implement work life balance initiatives for staff during 2015. At year-end 4 employees were availing of the Career Break Scheme, 26 employees were availing of the job/work sharing scheme, 31 employees availed of the Parental Leave Scheme, 16 employees availed of the Shorter Working Year Scheme and 7 employees availed of Unpaid Leave Scheme.

National Performance Indicator

The Council exceeded the 3% minimum National Per-

formance Indicator for expenditure on training and development as a percentage of total payroll costs in 2015. The out-turn was 4.53%.

Expenditure on Training & Development as a percentage of total payroll costs:

2014	2015
3.59%	4.53%

In relation to the number of working days lost to certified and uncertified illness the following statistics apply.

	2015
Certified	3.31%
Uncertified	0.20%

Local Service Indicator

Number of Training Days provided to staff (excluding Retained Fire Fighters) – 2,575

Industrial Relations

Despite a difficult year nationally, Laois County Council maintained good industrial relations during 2015 with no major disputes arising. The Council continues to operate in accordance with the Public Service Agreements in consultation with the relevant Unions.

Employee Training & Development

Laois County Council is committed to the training and development of all our employees in the context of securing the goals and objectives of the Council and for the skills development of employees. Laois County Council is striving toward continuous improvement in service delivery through the personal development of its employees.

The annual training programme is primarily based on the individual training needs identified through staff Personal Development Plans as part of the Performance Management Development System process. The Programme also incorporates Health & Safety requirements, National FETAC Programme, Third Level Open Learning Programme and various Seminars/Workshops as they arise.

Total expenditure on training was €379,317 (inclusive of expenditure for Fire Services). A very comprehensive training programme was delivered throughout 2015. A sample of the training programmes provided is as follows:-

- Signing Lighting & Guarding at Roadworks
- Safe Pass
- Advanced Surface Dressing
- Manual Handling
- First Aid Training
- Water Treatment Plant Operations
- Confined Spaces – Management of risk
- PMDS Briefing
- Excel/I.T. Training
- Sludge Handling Training
- Building Control Regulations
- Data Protection Training

Open Learning Programme

Laois County Council endeavours, subject to available resources, to facilitate and support employees wishing to pursue Third Level Open Learning Courses that are relevant to and contribute to the business development of both the Council and the employee's role and responsibilities. A sample of the Open Learning programmes facilitated during 2015 are as follows:-

- IPA – Certificate in Local Government
- IPASS – Certificate in Payroll Techniques
- University of Ulster – Civil Engineering

Staff Policies

In line with best practice in Human Resource Management, Laois County Council has developed a suite of HR staff policies - the following were introduced/revised during 2015:

- Shorter Working Year Scheme 2015
- Protected Disclosures – Interim policy and procedures
- Career Break Scheme in the Local Authority Sector
- Bereavement Leave in the Local Authority Sector

Equality and Supporting Diversity

Laois County Council is an equal opportunity employer and is committed to the introduction of a broad range of policies, practices and procedures which aim to recognise individual contribution and performance, develop each individual's capability and give everyone an equal opportunity to use his/her talent and realise his/her potential.

Laois County Council supports the employment of people with disabilities and meets the target as set

out by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Laois County Council continued to facilitate a number of work experience placements for people with disabilities.

Performance Indicators 2014

Total no of wholetime equivalent

The wholetime equivalent staffing number	347.57
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Working days lost to sickness

Percentage of working days lost to sickness absence through medically certified leave	3.83%
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Percentage of working days lost to sickness absence through self-certified leave	0.35%
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INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

A/Head of Information Systems:

John Smith

The Information & Communications Technology (I.C.T.) Department of Laois County Council, is based at the Council Headquarters at County Hall, Portlaoise. The Department comprises 7 staff members and manages the Council's entire I.C.T. infrastructure including Datacentre, computer and communication installations at County Hall, Area Offices, Libraries, and various other Council properties throughout the county. The I.C.T. Department provides technical support to all the other Council Departments and is responsible for the implementation, maintenance, management and security of the Council's I.C.T. systems. The Department is committed to a policy of continuous improvement of I.C.T. services both within the Council itself and to the public who avail of the Council's services.

Approximately 2,600 support calls from all departments within the Council were processed by technical support staff during 2015.

Hardware Upgrades

Work continued throughout 2015 on upgrading desktop computers throughout the various Departments in County Hall, including Motor Taxation where new

hardware was installed which provided more efficient and reliable access to the NVDF system. In addition upgrade work was carried out at the Comms Room in Aras 2 including the installation of a new UPS system and other switching hardware.

Data Protection

The Council's commitment to the implementation of the requirements of the Data Protection Acts saw further sessions of staff training in Data Protection Awareness conducted in the latter part of 2015. Similar training courses were provided in 2014 and any further training needs will be assessed in 2016 with a view to the provision of further training where a need is identified.

Upgrade of Agresso Financial Management System

Laois County Council was amongst the first Local Authorities to implement the Agresso Financial Management system in 2001. There have been a number of upgrades and enhancements to the system since then. Work on the most significant upgrade in a number of years commenced in late 2015 and is due to go live by the end of the first quarter of 2016. The I.C.T. Department will be working alongside the Agresso Project Team on various aspects of the Project including provision of the required hardware environment and technical support as the project progresses towards completion.

System for Council Meetings

A decision was taken in 2015 to implement a computerised system for the conduct of meetings of the Elected Council. The new Meetings system will facilitate a reduction in the amount of paper handling and processing required and will also reduce postage and other costs. Documentation, reports and other meeting related correspondence will be available to Members without the need for large volumes of paperwork.

Social Media

Laois.ie

Laois.ie had 532,037 page views in 2015, over 194,872 sessions and 113,374 unique visitors. This is an average of over 1,457 visits per day. Most visitors use our Online Planning Enquiry facilities, the next most popular section was Job Vacancy enquiries. Online Payment facilities are also very popular with our Website users and are a convenient way to pay for various Local Government Services. Likewise increasing numbers of Website visitors make use of the Motortax Online system. Our online contact/enquiry

form also attracts a steady stream of enquiries on a weekly basis.

Twitter:

The Council's main twitter page - @LaoisCouncil has 3218 followers.

Laois Heritage Forum - @LaoisHeritage has 1926 followers.

Laois Libraries - @LaoisLibraries has 1148 followers. Music Generation Laois - @MusicGenLaois has 254 followers.

The Arthouse and Library - @ArthouseLibrary has 232 followers.

Midlands Energy - @MidlandEnergy has 95 followers.

Laois Tourism - @LaoisTourism has 414 followers.

James Fintan Lalor School - @JFLSchool has 186 followers.

Websites

The I.C.T. Department is committed to reducing costs by developing and maintaining more websites in house where possible. Considerable progress was made in this area in 2015 and it is anticipated that development work in some areas will be complete in early 2016. The Council currently hosts and maintains at total of 14 websites.

Fix Your Street

www.fixyourstreet.ie is a website that enables users to report issues to their local Council. The website can be used to report non emergency issues such as graffiti, road defects, issues with street lighting, water leaks/drainage issues, and litter or illegal dumping. In accordance with the commitment in the Programme for Government, issues raised via this website will be responded to within 2 working days.

Facebook pages:

Laois County Council - www.facebook.com/Laois-CountyCouncil. This is our main Facebook page and it is updated with news and information from all departments.

Laois Heritage Forum - www.facebook.com/laois.heritage.forum used to raise awareness of all aspects of built, natural and cultural heritage of County Laois.

Laois Libraries - www.facebook.com/LaoisLibraries. Updates with news and events from each of the local libraries.

Laois County Fire & Rescue Service - www.facebook.com/laoisfire - used to inform of local incidents, rescues and training events.

Environment - www.facebook.com/LaoisEnvironment

Keep Laois Clean – used to keep followers informed of competitions, community events, clean ups and re-cycling information.

Laois Tidy Towns - www.facebook.com/pages/Laois-Tidy-Towns/163631410408752, another Environment website to highlight the good work done by tidy town groups throughout Laois.

Laois Tourism - www.facebook.com/laoistourism - used as a useful marketing tool to promote County Laois.

The Arthouse and Library - www.facebook.com/thearthouseandlibrary - used to advertise events in The Arthouse Gallery and Library in Stradbally.

James Fintan Lalor School - www.facebook.com/JamesFintanLalor - used to promote our James Fintan Lalor school, held annually here in Laois.

Laois Arts - www.facebook.com/LaoisArts - used by the Arts section to endorse events throughout Laois.

Laois School of Music - www.facebook.com/LaoisSchoolofMusic, maintained by our Music Co-Ordinator to highlight and promote the School's good work.

Music Generation Laois - www.facebook.com/MusicGenerationLaois - used to advertise this fabulous music education service for children and young people in Laois.

Performance Indicators 2014

No. of page visits to local authority website

The cumulative total page views	483,393
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Overall cost of ICT provision per whole time equivalent

Overall Cost	€2,975.00
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Housing Strategic Policy Committee

Chair: Paschal McEvoy, M.C.C.

Members

Sectoral

Willie Aird, M.C.C.	Michael Kelly Jr.
Caroline Dwane	(Development/
Stanley, M.C.C.	Construction)
Catherine Fitzgerald, M.C.C.	Andrew Cremin
Paddy Bracken, M.C.C.	(Business/
	Commercial)
	Sheelagh Coyle
	(Social inclusion)
	Barbara Lalor
	Community/Voluntary)

A/Director of Services: Julie Bergin

Senior Executive Officer: Michael Rainey

Senior Executive Engineer: P J Dempsey

Senior Social Worker: Fionnuala Daly

HOUSING SERVICES

The Council's key objective is to maximise the availability of accommodation to meet different categories of need and to promote the full range of housing options.

Highlights during 2015

- Completion of construction of 6 No. 3-bed units in Clodiagh Way, Clonaslee.



- Acquisition of 24 social units in various locations across the County.
- Successful delivery of 132 grants for disabled and elderly people living in the County.
- Commencement of design for proposed development of 33 units at Conniberry Way, Old Knockmay Road, Portlaoise

Report on SPC

The Housing SPC met in March, September and December 2015 at which various issues were discussed and noted by Members.

Social Housing Investment Programme

The provisional Social Housing Investment Programme allocation for the period 2015 to 2017 is €29,400,000. This includes construction of social units, acquisitions, Part V units, Return of Voids and Capital Assistance Scheme.

Under construction, 6 No. units were completed in Clodiagh Way, Clonaslee resulting in a drawdown of funds of €453,690. Under acquisitions, 24 No. units were purchased at a cost of €2,672,346 and 10 further units are currently under conveyancing process. The design for the proposed development of 33 units at Conniberry Way, Old Knockmay Road, Portlaoise was submitted to the Department in December 2015 for approval.

CLSS & Capital Assistance Scheme

At 31st December 2015, 271 units were provided under the Capital Loan & Subsidy Scheme and 259 units were provided under the Capital Assistance Scheme. Under the Capital Assistance Scheme call for proposals in April 2015 Laois were successful in securing funding for the acquisition of 16 No. units at various locations in Portlaoise, Mountmellick & Timahoe for homeless persons by Cluid Housing Association, the construction of 16 No. units for older people & people with special needs in Portlaoise by Respond Housing Association and the construction of 8 No. units for people with special needs in Portlaoise by Oaklee Housing Trust. The total grant available for these 40 units is €5.4m approx.

RAS & Leasing

To date the Housing Section has secured a total of 241 properties under the Rental Accommodation Scheme and 91 properties under the Social Leasing initiative. In 2015 Laois County Council were successful in securing Departmental approval for a number of leasing initiatives with Approved Housing Bodies, including accommodation for 13 No. Syrian families in Portlaoise. In total, 35 extra units were approved under social leasing by the Department in 2015 and it is expected that more units will become available under the scheme in 2016.

Traveller Accommodation

The Housing Section continues to implement the Traveller Accommodation Programme 2014-2018. The new Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee held a meeting in 2015.

Housing Maintenance and Relet

In 2015, the Housing Section continued to improve the business procedures relating to the maintenance and re-letting of Council stock through effective prioritisation and use of the financial and human resources available. In addition to the Council's own funding, the DoECLG provided an additional €61,228 for the refurbishment of 12 No vacant units in 2015.

Fabric Upgrade and Improvement Works

The DoECLG funding for energy upgrades and once-off adaptation grants allowed the Housing Section to also make significant structural improvements to a substantial number of its properties. Attic and wall insulation works were carried out on 407 properties. The original allocation of €334,679 was increased by a further €221,257 bringing the final allocation for 2015 to €555,936.

Estate Management

Estate Management remains a key function for the Housing Section, with 2015 seeing increased levels of interaction with tenants and resident groups. The Housing Section provided a range of supports to various resident groups including grants where appropriate.

Private Grants

In 2015, the DoECLG provided an allocation of €588,589 for Mobility Aid Grants, Housing Adaptation Grants for People with Disabilities and Housing Aid for Older People grants. Following a request for further funding, the Housing Section was provided with additional funding of €150,000 bringing the total allocation to €738,589. Through effective management of the funding available the Housing Section has been able to keep the scheme open for the whole of 2015.

Treo Nua Portlaoise Resource Centre

Treo Nua Portlaoise Resource Centre continues to play an important role in the social, economic and community infrastructure of Portlaoise and is providing essential social and training services to the community. The crèche, after-school rooms, meeting,

community and training rooms are all busy providing a range of services, educational courses, physical activity classes and family support services.

Knockmay Park

Building on the success of Treo Nua, an area of waste ground at the centre of Knockmay was regenerated in 2013. This area was landscaped and the existing entrances to the park were redesigned to include a 2m wide walking track and small football pitch. Lighting and CCTV cameras were also incorporated into the park. Following consultation with the local residents groups, further works were carried out in 2014 to enhance the park and to remove areas of surface water. The Housing Section continues to support local resident groups in the upkeep and maintenance of this area.

Part V- Housing Strategy

In 2015, the Housing Department continued to monitor developments and engage with developers in the County to reach agreement for compliance with Part V of the Planning & Development Act 2000 (as amended).

Private Sites

A number of private sites are for sale in Castletown and Ballyroan.

Performance Indicators 2014

Social Housing Stock

The overall total no. of dwellings provided by the local authority comprising	34
The no. of dwellings directly provided, i.e. constructed	1
Purchased by local authority	20
The no. of units provided under the Rental Accommodation Scheme	0
The no. of units provided under the Housing Assistance Payment Scheme	N/A
The no. of units provided under the Social Housing Leasing Initiative	13

HOUSING

The overall total no. of social housing dwellings in the local authority		2338	Long Term Homeless Adults	
The total no. of dwellings directly provided (constructed or purchased)		2019	No. of adults in Emergency Accommodation	3
The total no. of units provided under the Rental Accommodation Scheme		160	% of persons in Emergency Accommodation using emergency accommodation services in excess of 6 months over the year	33.33%
The total no. of units provided under the Housing Assistance Payment Scheme		N/A		
The total no. of units provided under the Social Housing Leasing Initiative		159		
Housing Voids				
The percentage of the total no. of dwellings at H1G that were vacant		0.74%		
Average Re-letting time and cost				
Time taken from the date of vacation of dwelling to the date when a new tenancy had commenced in the dwelling, averaged across all units re-let		10.17 wks		
The cost expended on getting the re-tenanted units ready for re-letting, averaged across all units re-let		€3,061.11		
Housing Maintenance Cost				
Expenditure on the repair and maintenance of housing bought or built by the local authority		€868.21		
Private Rented Sector Inspections				
Total no. of registered tenancies in the local authority area		3589		
No. of inspections carried out		162		

Community, Social, Cultural and Heritage Strategic Policy Committee

Director of Services: Anna Marie Delaney

Chair: Brendan Phelan, M.C.C.

Members **Sectoral**

Padraig Fleming, M.C.C.	P. J Phelan (Community/Voluntary)
Tom Mulhall, M.C.C.	Ricky Whelan (Environment/Conservation)
James Kelly, M.C.C.	Donald Scully (Farming Sector)
	Vacancy (Social Inclusion)

LOCAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

The Local Government Reform Act, 2014 provides for the establishment of Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) in the 31 local authority areas.

Laois Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) was established in September 2014 for the purposes of developing, co-ordinating and improving a coherent and strategic approach to Local Community Development.

The LCDC has primary responsibility for co-ordinating, planning and overseeing local and community development in the County.

The LCDC oversees the implementation of the Social Inclusion Community Action Programme (SICAP) by Laois Partnership Company. The LCDC also comprises the Local Action Group for the compilation and submission to Department of Environment, Community and Local Government of the Local Development Strategy in order to secure our county's element of the Rural Development Fund.

The LCDC also oversees the compilation and future implementation of the community and some overarching elements of the Local Economic and Community Plan. This Plan will agree the strategic framework for economic and community development resource allocation, and inform other planning processes. The plan will be presented for approval by Council in early 2016.

The LCDCs are based on membership from statutory and non-statutory bodies as follows:

- John Mulholland, Chief Executive of Laois County Council
- Ian McCormack, Senior Executive Officer
- Councillor John King
- Councillor Jerry Lodge
- Councillor Pascal McEvoy
- Evelyn Reddin, CEO, Local Enterprise Office
- Olivia Clarke, Department of Social Protection
- Joe Ruane, Area Manager, Health Services Executive
- Linda Tynan, Laois/Offaly Education and Training Board
- Anne Goodwin, CEO, Laois Partnership Company
- Joe Thompson, Co-Ordinator, Youth Work Ireland (Laois)
- Dave Fingleton, Laois PPN (Environmental Pillar)
- Michael Bergin, Farming Pillar
- Mary White, Laois PPN (Social Inclusion Pillar)
- PJ Campbell, Laois PPN (Community/Voluntary Pillar)
- Paddy Buggy, Laois PPN (Social Inclusion Pillar)
- Robbie Quinn, Laois PPN (Community & Voluntary Pillar)

The LCDC was chaired in 2015 by Councillor John King succeeded by Paddy Buggy.

LAOIS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION NETWORK



The Public Participation Network (PPN) is a new framework for public engagement and participation in Laois. The PPN is the main link through which the Local Authority connects with community, voluntary and environmental sectors without prejudice to other consultation processes.

Laois PPN was established in March 2015 and continues to grow its network with 280 groups registered and 22 people elected countywide to represent the PPN on local authority and other decision making committees in Laois.

The aim of a PPN Structure is to facilitate and enable voluntary organisations operating within the wider community to give voice to a diverse range of views, issues and interests within the local government system. The PPN, facilitated by a Secretariat:

- Facilitates the participation by the public and representation of communities in a fair, equitable and transparent manner through the environmental, social inclusion and community/voluntary sectors on decision making bodies.
- Strengthens the capacity of the environmental, social inclusion and community/voluntary groups to contribute positively to the community that they live/participate in.
- Provides information to the environmental, social inclusion and community/voluntary sectors and acts as a hub around which information can be received and distributed.

In 2015 the PPN Secretariat Members were as follows:

- Brian Maher, Portlaoise Area Rep
- Robbie Quinn, Portlaoise Community & Voluntary Rep
- Mary White, Portlaoise Social Inclusion Rep
- Chris Uys, Portlaoise Environment Rep
- Michael J. Cobbe, Graiguecullen/Portarlinton Area Rep
- Pat Whelan, Graiguecullen/Portarlinton Community & Voluntary Rep
- Margaret Guijt Lawlor, Graiguecullen/Portarlinton Social Inclusion Rep
- Ricky Whelan, Graiguecullen/Portarlinton Environment Rep
- Michael Dowling, Borris-in-Ossory/Mountmellick Area Rep
- Noreen Byrne, Borris-in-Ossory/Mountmellick Community & Voluntary Rep
- Paddy Buggy, Borris-in-Ossory/Mountmellick Social Inclusion Rep
- Anneka Harvey, Borris-in-Ossory/Mountmellick Environment Rep

PPN Representatives to local authority and other committees

Economic Development, Enterprise and Planning Strategic Policy Committee

- Noel Gavigan – Environment Sector

Transportation, Environment and Emergency Services Strategic Policy Committee

- Kitty Creighton – Environment Sector

Community, Social, Cultural and Heritage Strategic Policy Committee

- P.J. Phelan – Community & Voluntary Sector
- VACANT – Social Inclusion Sector
- Ricky Whelan – Environment Sector

Housing Policy Strategic Policy Committee

- Barbara Lalor – Community & Voluntary
- Sheelagh Coyle – Social Inclusion

Local Community Development Committee

- P.J. Campbell – Community & Voluntary
- Robbie Quinn – Community & Voluntary
- Paddy Buggy – Social Inclusion
- Mary White – Social Inclusion
- Dave Fingleton – Environment

County Laois Joint Policing Committee

- Noel Dooley
- Tom Jones
- Michael Cobbe
- Pat Fitzpatrick

Laois Heritage Forum

- Mary Lawlor – Community & Voluntary
- Mary White – Social Inclusion
- Joe Murphy – Environment

Midland Regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force

- Pat Fitzpatrick

Laois Tourism

- Michael Dowling

Laois Sports Partnership

- Eibhlin Smith
- Marian Condren

Next steps in development of the PPN include networking and shared learning for groups, linkage group establishment and the development of a feedback mechanism for information flow between the decision making bodies and local communities.

COUNTY LAOIS JOINT POLICING COMMITTEE (JPC)

A new County Joint Policing Committee was established in 2015, following a national review of JPC's and associated national guidelines issued in 2014. The JPC met 3 times publicly and in committee on 4 occasions in 2015.

As per guidelines, a 5-year JPC Strategy in cooperation with An Garda Síochána, the Local Authority and communities is currently being prepared and will be adopted in 2016. A Public meeting was held in November 2015 at which members of the public posed questions to the Committee with responses provided by An Garda Síochána and Laois County Council.

LAOIS TRAVELLER INTERAGENCY GROUP

This Group comprises a number of agencies and organisations whose work includes the betterment of life for the travelling community in the county.

The first annual national conference for Traveller Inter-Agency Groups was hosted by Department of Justice in May 2015. The Theme of the Conference "Traveller Inter-Agency Process: The Way Forward" was aimed at making Traveller Interagency Groups more effective locally. Delegates were drawn from local authorities and local Traveller representatives. Difficulties were identified with the process and recommendations were provided with a view to improving the effectiveness of the Traveller Inter-Agency Process and ensuring that the interests of the Traveller and Roma communities are reflected in the Local Economic and Community Plans being developed nationally.

LAOIS AGE FRIENDLY COUNTY PROGRAMME



Laois County Council in association with Age Friendly Ireland, played host to over 200 delegates who attended a Consultation Showcase for people aged 55 and over in the Abbeylax Manor Hotel, Abbeylax in May 2015. The day long event, organised by Laois County Council, was hosted by special guest, retired

TD and award winning author, Mary O'Rourke, who delighted the delegates and spoke of her own experience of getting older in life.

The event included information stands from 18 service providers, both local and national, and presentations by Laois Fire Services, An Garda Síochána, HSE Fair Deal Scheme and the Council's own Heritage Officer Catherine Casey, who outlined details of proposed national and local programmes for the 1916 commemoration. A "Sit Fit" programme was also demonstrated thanks to the team in Laois Sports Partnership.

Most importantly on the day, the views of older people were sought through a consultation process carried out by Age Friendly Ireland and Laois County Council, in respect of how older people view their quality of life in County Laois currently in terms of transport, outdoor spaces, respect and inclusion of older people socially, civic participation, access to information and health services, to name but a few.

The aim of the event was to consult with older people so that their views can be taken into account by the Laois Age Friendly Alliance, a high level interagency group who will work together over the coming months to put a programme of improvements in place for the future.

COMMUNITY SMOKE ALARMS SCHEME 2015

In 2015, Laois County Council Community Section in association with the Laois County Fire Department engaged in the scheme to purchase 310 smoke alarms and distribute them to homes across the county.

LAOIS COMHAIRLE NA nÓG 2015



Laois Comhairle na nÓg, enjoyed another successful year in 2015, with the recruitment of several new representatives countywide to the Comhairle.

Laois Comhairle na nÓg strives to represent the young people of Laois and who in a real way want to

make their voices heard among the adult decision makers in our county, so that the future generation can help to make our county a better place to live, work and visit.

Laois Comhairle na nÓg entered a new phase in 2015 when Laois County Council signed a service level agreement with Youth Work Ireland (Laois) for its operation and development.



Speaking at the official signing of the agreement, Cathaoirleach Cllr. John Joe Fennelly praised Youth Work Ireland (Laois) and Laois Comhairle na nÓg separately, for their work on behalf of young people in county Laois.

Director of Services, Anna Marie Delaney expressed Laois County Council's delight at having Youth Work Ireland (Laois) come on board with Laois Comhairle na nÓg on an official footing. She further stated that cementing the relationship between the local authority and YWI Laois was paramount, and the expertise and commitment of the youth service would not only further enhance the excellent work of Laois Comhairle na nÓg, but would also allow the local authority to strengthen links for the Comhairle with local and national stakeholders, this being a key objective of the Department of Youth and Children Affairs in respect of youth participation and consultation.

It is the aim of Laois Comhairle to consult with the adult decision making bodies who make policies and plans for our county, such as ensuring protection for young people and the provision of facilities or information for them. In July, 2015 Laois Comhairle hosted a music and family event to highlight the importance of mental health awareness entitled "Let's Go Mental". This event culminated months of work by the young people to raise awareness of services, and to raise the issue of suicide prevention and mental health awareness among decision makers in Laois.

The Comhairle is also tasked with the provision of feedback to the young people across the county on

these issues and consultations. Laois was also represented in 2015 on the National Comhairle na nÓg Executive by Julian Nagi.



The Laois Comhairle Annual General Meeting (AGM) was held on 12th November, 2015 in Portlaoise College and was attended by over 90 young people. The AGM was based on the national framework "Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures" which was discussed at length and a number of issues raised at the AGM will form part of the Comhairle's work for 2016.

LAOIS CONNECTS MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS WEEK



Laois CONNECTS Positive Mental Health Awareness Week 2015 was held from 5th to 11th October, 2015 and once again it was a great success. Helping people in communities across Laois to cope with mental health issues was the focus of a major week long initiative which ran countywide.



A variety of well attended events took place during the week, which also highlighted the professional services and supports that are available to everyone including HSE talks on “How to Access Mental Health Services”, “Hearing Voices” and “Healthy Body-Healthy Mind”. Professor Jim Lucey addressed a large gathering in the Abbeyleix Manor Hotel on “Mental Health and Wellbeing”. The event is held annually in memory of the late Kathleen Gorman, a well known personality and community champion in Laois. Abbeyleix Bog Project hosted walks and talks. Other events included yoga classes, walks, and a 5K Parkrun along the banks of the Canal in Vicarstown.



The week was hosted by a number of agencies working in collaboration – Laois County Council, the HSE, Laois Sports Partnership, Mental Health Ireland, Laois Partnership Company and Laois/Offaly ETB. A great number of organisations also supported events

during the week including Glosna House, Men’s Sheds, Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise and Rathdowney Youth Café and Portlaoise Rugby Club.



The official opening by Cathaoirleach Catherine Fitzgerald of the newly renovated Pairc an Phobail took place incorporating a Green Gym Session at the outdoor gym in the park and the launch of the Well-ness Information Boards for Business and Sports Organisations took place in Portlaoise Rugby Club.



COMMUNITY PROJECTS (ELECTED MEMBERS) FUND

The Community Project Fund provides financial assistance to groups/committees/organisations in County Laois by applications recommended by each Elected Member of Laois County Council. 51 applications were processed in 2015.

SCHOOLS BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP

In 2015, Laois County Council continued its partnership with 5th year students in Portlaoise College, to encourage school completion through the roll out of a programme entitled “Skills @ Work”. Students were mentored during the 2015/2016 school year by Council staff, which included a visit to County Hall, a meet and greet with Council employees including the Council’s Chief Executive, a visit to Portlaoise Fire Station and a session with the Council’s Human Resources Department in respect of interview skills and preparation of CV’s. The programme concluded with mock interviews conducted by Council employees

and a feedback session by the students who took part.

Funded under the National Development Plan, the Schools' Business Partnership (SBP) has to date matched almost 200 post primary schools in Ireland with a local business. Keen to continue this successful relationship, Laois County Council and Portlaoise College both intend to take the programme on again in the next academic year.

Support for young people in Laois continued in 2015 and the Council is represented on the Rathdowney Youth Café Consortium and Garda Youth Diversion Projects in both Portlaoise and Potarlinton.

The development of Rathdowney Youth Café is almost complete and support for the group by the consortium will continue in developing the space for young people.



Collaborative Projects/Social Inclusion

Community & Enterprise Section staff represented Laois County Council on several Boards and Committees during 2015 and also collaborated with the following agencies/organisations on various projects and initiatives throughout 2015:

- Portlaoise Street Soccer Leagues



- Community Coaching Programme
- Laois Sports Partnership Social Inclusion Disability Programme
- Portlaoise Youth Café
- Laois Ethnic Minority Support Group events
- Sacred Heart School Portlaoise "Sacred Hearts" commemorative book
- Scoil Chriost Ri "Cycle Against Suicide Event"



- Laois Partnership Company
- Laois Trip
- BLOCK and PORT Garda Diversion Projects
- Rathdowney Youth Cafe Consortium
- Laois Mental Health Collaborative Group
- LABEL (Laois Third Level Centre)
- Midland Traveller Conflict & Mediation Committee

Performance Indicators 2014

Participation in Comhairle na nÓg scheme

Percentage of local schools and youth groups involved in the local Youth Council/Comhairle na nÓg scheme 51.22%

No of gateway participants employed as % of target

No. of gateway participants who commenced a work placement expressed as a % of the placements allocated to the local authority 34.55%

% of nominees to LCDC membership via the PPN structures from the most marginalised SICAP groups

No. of nominees to LCDC

membership via the PPN structures from the most marginalised SICAP groups 0

Number progressing to FT, PT or self employment within 6 months of receipt of a Goal 3 employment support

No. progressing 40

Tourism

Throughout 2015 the Council continued to promote the County and worked actively with the Board of Laois Tourism, Failte Ireland, and the Community at large to promote Laois as a Festival and Event destination and build its profile as a destination for visitors to return annually.

A range of festivals and events were planned and organised including:

The Laois International Golf Challenge:

The Laois International Golf Challenge took place from the 18th to 21st May, 2015. This event has grown steadily over the years and this year 150 golfers participated from Wales, England, Malta, Spain and Northern Ireland.



The Golf Challenge has been ongoing for the last 11 years and is held with the support of Laois County Council, Laois Tourism and Failte Ireland. The 2015 Challenge was played in the K Club, Mountrath & Rathdowney golf courses and the finals took place in Killenard. An awards ceremony for winners took place on Thursday 21st May 2015.

The Rose of Tralee Regional Festival

The Rose of Tralee Regional Festival took place from Thursday May 28th to Sunday May 31st. The Festival highlights included the official opening of the event at the Civic Plaza on Friday 29th, Vintage Car Parade

of Roses and their Rose Buds followed by Streets Party on Saturday 30th and the Annual visit to Abbeyleix and Castle Durrow on Sunday 31st May.



The Gordon Bennett Irish Classic Car Run

The Gordon Bennett Irish Classic Car Run took place over the June Bank Holiday weekend. A Cathaoirleach's reception was held at Aras an Chontae on Friday, May 29th, 2015 to welcome visitors, particularly overseas visitors to Laois. The Gordon Bennett Festival is an important component of the Rose of Tralee Regional Festival in Portlaoise.



Other Festivals and Events which were supported by the Council include,

- Rosenallis Festival on the Mountain
- Birr & District Motor Club Car Rally
- Mountmellick Summerfest Festival
- Rathdowney Music Festival
- Irish Country Roads & Culture Trails
- Strabally Family Fair- Laois Hunt
- Laois Walks Festival 2015
- Festival Francais de Portlaoise
- Strabally Steam Rally
- Strabally Market House Restoration
- Laois County Fleadh

Community Tourism Diaspora Grants Scheme

Now in its second year, the scheme provides a na-

tional fund of €1m to support local community-based events and festivals each year. Last year, 15 local events were supported in Laois, attracting a lot of visitors from overseas. The festivals funded this year included

- Scarecrow Festival
- Visit of "Santa Margerita Catholic High School Choir" - Timahoe
- Half Door Club Music & Dance Festival - Castletown
- 'Timber 2015' The Irish Forestry, Woodland & Bio Energy Show
- William Edmundson & Friends Homecoming – Mountmellick/Rosenallis
- Bare in the Woods - Garryhinch

The National Ploughing Championships 2015

The National Ploughing Championships were held in Rathineska from 22nd – 24th September 2015. This is the third year in succession that this prestigious National Event took place in Laois. With record crowds of 281,000 attending the event it made this year's event the most successful to date.

ARTS SECTION

Laois School of Music

The Laois School of Music enrolment was maintained at 300 pupils and the new premises has proved very successful. The Orchestra had a very busy year, and were invited to join Fraserburgh Academy in Aberdeen, Scotland to represent Laois on St. Patrick's Day. A group of 20 students, 12 parents and 2 tutors travelled over and had a very successful visit, playing in school and community halls. The group from Scotland made a return visit to Laois in October and spent time preparing music with their Laois counterparts before performing in a number of local schools. This will be an on-going partnership between the two schools, with further visits planned both ways over the coming years. The 2nd Annual Music Festival took place in March and almost doubled in numbers from the previous year. In partnership with LSM, MGL and IAYO, the Oboe was introduced as a rare-breed instrument and is going well with three pupils so far.

Music Generation Laois

The Music Generation Laois programme continues to grow and over 2300 children accessed music tuition through the programme in 2015. In addition to weekly lessons, children and young people participated in a range of concerts, workshops and masterclasses, including the Music Generation Laois 3rd Birthday Celebratory Concerts in June 2015. In July, Duke Special took part in a Songwriting Project with School of Rock and Pop participants. A series of traditional music workshops took place in Portlaoise which culminated with masterclasses with Triona Marshall (harp) and Martin Tourish (Accordion). The John Lennon Bus returned to Portlaoise in August 2015, and 17 young people had the opportunity to climb aboard and write and record new songs with accompanying music videos. Music Generation Laois programmes include a School of Rock and Pop, a Singing Programme, The Music Box a programme for children with special needs, a Trad Programme, Orchestral Programme, and a 'Stampede' (world drumming) programme. In April 2015, Music Generation Laois established a harp ensemble.

Laois Youth Theatre

The Laois Youth Theatre programme included weekly workshops, performances and exchanges for up to 80 children/young people facilitated by qualified drama tutors. They presented 2 successful plays "The Mobile Phone Show" and "Whiplash" in Portlaoise Youth Education Centre in May.

Dunamais Arts Centre

Laois County Council continues to support the Dunamais Arts Centre as one of the main Arts venues in Laois.

The Arthouse Stradbally

The programme included artist residencies, workshops, tours, open studio events and exhibitions. Hosting a series of artists residencies utilising the Percent for Art Scheme a highlight of which included a very successful outdoor painting and exhibition project titled "Plein Air" with Artist Jock Nichol in the summer.

The Artists in Schools Scheme

The Artists in Schools Scheme ran in nine schools in 2015. This Scheme allows students to have an in depth experience with the professional artist and gives them the opportunity to experience different art

mediums.

Bealtaine Festival – for Older People

The Arts Office presented a full programme of events for older people in community and care settings during the month of May.



Midland Collaborative Projects

Two Midlands Arts and Culture magazines were published in 2015 and distributed throughout the Midlands region.

Summer Arts programme

A series of 3 day art workshops were held throughout the county incorporating socially inclusive projects in Mountmellick and Mountrath.

National Culture Night

Culture Night on Friday 18th September was a huge success with free events all around Laois. Highlights included a series of songwriting workshops with John Spillane and a finale music concert featuring some of the students who participated. Other events included an outdoor workshop on the Rock of Dunamaise, an art and relaxation workshop and family craft workshops in the Dunamaise Arts Centre and an art and craft exhibition in Abbeyleix.



The James Fintan Lalor School

The third James Fintan Lalor School took place in October and included a weekend of debates and political discussion inspired by the writings of James Fintan Lalor, music and storytelling with Nuala Hayes from "Folktales of Laois" and an exhibition of original illustrations by Rita Duffy from the book.



Leaves Literature Festival

The annual Leaves Literature Festival took place in November and included a packed programme of childrens' workshops, adult scriptwriting workshops, readings and music.

Other activities included

- Arts Act Grants Awards
- Tyrone Guthrie Centre Bursary
- Exhibitions
- Percent for Art Projects – Artist Residencies
- Support of Festivals and community arts events

SPORT & LEISURE SECTION

The Sport and Leisure Section continued to deliver a successful series of events and activities during 2015.

The following are some of the highlights:

Leisure and Play facilities

Portlaoise & Portarlinton Leisure Centres continued to deliver an excellent public service and the Boards of both centres are operating efficiently. Both centres achieved Ireland Active White Flag - Gold Medal Award 2015/16. Laois County Council was successful in securing a Sports Capital Grant of €102,000 to be shared between both centres to upgrade gym equipment to which Laois County Council have committed €80,000 match funding.

Laois County Council currently manages twenty Community Play Facilities which require significant annual Maintenance & Repair Programme.

Spring 2015 saw the refurbishment of play facilities at Páirc an Phobail, Portlaoise. The Sport and Leisure Section oversaw the provision of additional facilities in the park including an Outdoor Gym, Orienteering Course, Natural Playground and the Resurfacing of Pathways providing excellent Walking Routes. These projects were funded by Department of Tourism Transport and Sport, Irish Public Bodies, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Healthy Towns as well as Laois County Council.



Bike Week 2014

Laois County Council successfully secured funding from the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport in 2015 to co-ordinate a series of events with the assistance of Community groups countywide.

Bike Week is a national programme that encourages over thousands of people all over Ireland to give cycling a go, whether for fun, as a means of getting to the local shops, school or just to visit friends.

Laois County Council Sport and Leisure Section co-ordinated 23 Bike Week events held from 13th – 21st June 2015 which were attended by over 1497 participants throughout Co Laois.

Ten Laois schools successfully participated in Bike Week Events; Schools included St Fiacc's NS, Mayo NS and Rath NS. In total 943 children took part in Bike Week Activities.

13 different community events were organised for Bike Week including Kiln Lane Residence Association Mountrath, 6th Laois Mountrath Scouts, the Glen Residence Association, Portarlinton and Mountmellick MYDC.

The Swan Youth Club hosted a 10km family fun cycle. This evening event received great support with 41 cy-

clists and in all 110 locals enjoyed a great community evening of chat & the sociable cuppa!

Jelly Tots Crèche & friends hosted a fun cycle morning for children 3-4 years old. The event was held in Fr Breen Park in Abbeyleix where 95 little people had lots of fun & wonderful wobbles. This bike event was a great success

110 participants turned out for The Ten Towns Challenge (Ossory Cycling Club) Durrow Co Laois.

The 90km cycle started @ 10am (experienced cyclists) and the 20km cycle started @ 11am (families & leisure cyclists). The food, refreshments and the chat was very much enjoyed by all.

Laois County Council's staff also embraced Bike Week and organised lunchtime cycles for staff.



Children's Activity Programme

2015 Summer Brochure

The Sport and Leisure office produced its annual guide to summer activities for families. 8,000 copies were distributed throughout schools and libraries in county Laois. The Summer Brochure was launched in Ballacolla in May 2015.

Parks Tennis 2015

Laois County Council organised and delivered a very varied summer programme in 2015 throughout the county. Parks Tennis was delivered in Abbeyleix, Mountmellick, Portlaoise and Portarlinton with 220 children participating in this programme.

National Play Day 2015

Laois County Council delivered a programme of “free” events in Pairc an Phobail in the first week of July 2015, with the construction of a cardboard medieval city, sandcastle building, orienteering and shield/butterfly making to celebrate National Play Day. These events were extremely popular with children and parents alike.



National Recreation Week 2015

National Recreation Week 2015 is a joint initiative between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Local Authorities. National Recreation Week is aimed at young people aged 12 to 18 years. The overall purpose of the event in 2015 was to highlight the importance of recreation for young people and to encourage them to try an activity in the outdoors.

Funding was provided by DCYA to deliver a week long programme, that included an Adventure Hike, Canoeing, Outdoor Circuit Training, Orienteering, Spongee Polo and Bubble Soccer - all delivered in County Laois. Thirty three participants took part in these events which were a huge success.



Games on the Green

Laois County Council continued its successful partnerships with FAI, Leinster Rugby & Laois GAA to part fund the employment of development officers to deliver a sport in the community programme. The

Games on the Green programme saw Development Officers deliver coaching sessions to children in estates across the county. This programme is open to both boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 12 years for 12 weeks, on a weekly basis. The locations covered in the 2015 programme were Knockmay & Portlaoise Leisure Centre, Kiln Lane & Moonbaun Mountrath, Kilnacourt & Portarlinton Leisure Centre and Quigley Park Rathdowney. In total 300 children participated in the programme which culminated in a Grand Finale held at Portlaoise Leisure Centre in July 2015 with Laois County Council Cathaoirleach Catherine Fitzgerald in attendance.



WALKING FOOTBALL/GAELIC GAMES/RUGBY

Laois County Council continued to support this innovative programme in 2015.

Football/Gaelic Games/Rugby was a new project started at the end of 2014 in association with St Fin-tan’s Psychiatric Department and Triogue Centre. Participants play an adapted game ideal for individuals that have reduced or limited mobility. The programme was used to assist the participants to get active in a social environment.

Soccer Tods Programme

Soccer Tods has continued to offer an opportunity for boys and girls aged between 3 and 6 years of age to take part in an organised sporting activity. The programme is run over an 8 week period twice during the year in both Portlaoise and Portarlinton. The programme works on developing the basic skills of soccer including passing, dribbling, shooting and goalkeeping. The activity is non competitive with each child having a football during practice to ensure they get a large amount of contact time with the football which has been proven to help players develop. A number of the children that have taken part in Soccer Tods in the past have moved on to take part in other football programmes including Games on the Green, Summer Soccer Schools and Soccer Sisters. Soccer Tods means there is now a clear pathway for children

from 3 years of age onwards whether they would like to play competitively (club route) or recreational (fun soccer sessions).

Women/Girls Soccer

Soccer Sisters Programme

This programme is devised by the Women's Unit of the FAI to help give girls aged 7-12 the opportunity to take part in soccer. Many girls within Laois are currently not being catered for by clubs. With the soccer sisters and drop in session more girls are getting the opportunity to play soccer. Linking in with clubs is vital as a number of clubs have taken on teams from the girls that attended the programme. During the Easter holidays there were two camps held in Durrow and Ballylinan. 42 girls took part in the camps across 4 days. During the final quarter of the year two new clubs St Aengus Mountrath and Arlington AFC in Portarlinton started soccer sister club programmes with 46 girls registered. These groups will continue into 2016.



Football for All

The FAI Football for All programme is a soccer programme that takes place for individuals with special needs. There are many opportunities for individuals from primary school right up to adults. Within Laois the FAI development officer works with a number of different groups including National Learning Network, St. Francis Special School and Rehab Care, Oak House. The groups are separated by ability with one group of lower ability taking part in sessions each Thursday and the higher ability participants taking part in sessions every Friday. National Learning Network take part in a blitz day once a month which is run by the FAI in Graigecullen Co. Laois with teams coming from Laois, Offaly, Carlow, Kilkenny and Kildare. In 2015 two new groups were introduced to the FAI/LCC Football for All programme. Nua Healthcare a Portlaoise based residential care unit and community day centre for people with complex support re-

quirements joined with Rehab care and Oak house for their weekly football activity. Once a month the FAI/LCC Development Officer assists Laois Down Syndrome with their weekly gym group. Football activities are put on for the participants to enjoy and learn new skills.

Portlaoise Street League

The street leagues were run over 9 weeks from June until August to provide weekly activity for individuals who were students, long term unemployed, individuals who were recovering addicts, ethnic minority groups including Irish travellers. Teams played on a weekly basis in the league with a one day cup competition. 2015 continued to be a success with 139 participants taking part on a weekly basis. The winning and runner up team received prizes at the presentation day and will now represent Laois in the All Ireland Street league finals in Tallaght in April 2016. The Portlaoise Street League has been one of the most successful programmes with four players from the league representing Ireland in 2015. This brings the total number in 5 years to 8 international players. A huge success for such a small county.

Coach Education

2015 saw the largest number of courses and participants taking place since the start of the FAI/LCC partnership. During the year 8 Kick Start 1 courses were rolled out with approximately 200 participants and 2 Kick Start 2 with 36 participants.

LIBRARIES

The public Library Service performs an essential role in our communities by providing access to information, knowledge, lifelong learning and leisure reading in an inclusive manner. The Laois Library Service is delivered through a network of 4 full-time branches and 6 part-time branches. Library Services in the county continue to provide an excellent space for sections of the local community. The public libraries in Laois offer more than just books and have wide ranging services in all branches which include broadband internet services at very reasonable rates, printing, photocopying and scanning facilities, free WIFI for members, audio books, DVDS, music, online resources, daily newspapers and magazines, free events and clubs. Modern libraries offer a rich cultural and educational environment that provides a space and access for those who wish to enrich their day to day lives.

Portarlinton New Library

Works commenced on Portarlinton Library in January 2015. Dunnes Builders, Portarlinton were awarded the construction contract following a national tender competition. The project involved the demolition of the existing interior walls, removing the courthouse elements, new alterations including new windows entrance, flooring, courtyard, lighting and IT networks. The building also has an exterior insulated render to all the external walls and external landscaping works. Construction works were completed in November 2015 and the Library fit out and setup commenced in December 2015 with a proposed opening date of January 2016. The library now comprises of an area of 450 metres square which will cater for the growing populations of Portarlinton and its surrounding area. The new Library offers a state of the art facility for the whole community and has over 16,000 volumes of stock and media, upgraded and increased IT printing scanning facilities and free WIFI. It will be open on fulltime hours including Saturdays and has been fitted out with self check systems which will enable customers to check their own items in and out.

Portlaoise New Library- Shaws Site Main Street

The Shaws building in Lower Main Street Portlaoise has been acquired by Laois County Council for the provision of a new Public Library and local studies section.

The building is located strategically in the heart of Main Street, Portlaoise. It will improve the accessibility of the library for all parts of the community. Contracts for the building/site have been signed and keys etc have been handed to Council. The project will now move to detailed planning and design stage. A meeting was held with Minister Alan Kelly T.D. in February 2015 to progress funding for the library

Events and Activities

Laois County Libraries held a large variety of events and activities in all Branch Libraries in 2015. Children and Adults throughout the county enjoyed the numerous events and activities organised by library staff. This year's programme was hectic and exciting with author visits, art competitions, art launches and exhibitions, music recitals, book clubs, computer classes and storytelling.

The highlights of the year include Bealtaine, Seachtain na Gaeilge, Heritage Week, Culture Night and Children's Book Festival.

WIFI

WIFI is available in Portlaoise, Mountmellick, Mountrath, Abbeyleix, Portarlinton and Rathdowney Libraries.

Bookfund

The Bookfund for 2015 was €75,000.

Record Breakers Summer Reading Challenge

Once again, the Summer Reading Challenge proved a big success. Over 1200 children of all ages from the county completed the challenge, each reading 6 books throughout July and August. Irish Author, Oisín McGann, launched the challenge and ran a series of workshops. He returned to present the successful participants with their medals in October. The Summer Reading Challenge is a great initiative which further promotes literacy and reading in children and encourages reading for all ages.

Local History/Studies

The Local studies and Archives section of the county library continues to be well used, internationally via email queries and by local historians and members of the public. Over the past number of years Library staff have improved and added extra content to the local history website www.askaboutireland.ie. It includes a large selection of postcards of county Laois e.g. old streetscapes and famous landmarks. There is also added narrative about local customs and folklore. The link from the Library Web Page is: www.laois.ie/leisureandculture/libraries/localresearch. Some well known books on local history have been digitised and are now available online. They are "Statistical Survey of the Queens County" by Coote, "The History of the Queens County" by O'Byrne and "The Manor of Glenmore". Archive Newspapers are now available in digital form in Branch libraries.

For Heritage Week, Mountrath, Rathdowney, Portarlinton, Abbeyleix, Mountmellick and Portlaoise Libraries had a visit from Irish History Live and children listened to Michael Moylan recount tales of history and heritage. Genealogy workshops and biodiversity workshops were held in libraries throughout the county.

Mountrath Library

Mountrath Library continued with events and children's activities during 2015 including monthly class visits and book displays along with arts and crafts for younger readers. The weekly Knitting Club is held every Friday morning and is proving very popular.

Adults and children's bookclubs are held every month and the Camera Club which was launched in November is proving to be a huge success.

Abbeyleix Library

Abbeyleix Library continues to have weekly art classes for children and monthly events. The Art Gallery continues to be a premier location for art exhibitions with eight exhibitions during the year featuring Níav Reilly, Trudi Killeen and Ciaran O'Brien. Once again, the Children's Book Festival was a great success with class visits and author visits including Claire Hennessy & Kieran Mark-Crowley. The weekly chess club for children continues to grow, and there has also been a great take-up on Spanish and German classes.

Portlaoise Library

Portlaoise Library had a busy year of events and these include monthly adult book clubs, knitting classes, weekly class visits by local and surrounding schools, weekly Irish Classes "Ciorcal Comhrá" and competitions.. An Irish Evening was held in March with Irish dancing, singing and music with an attendance of over 100. Another successful series of talks on the Architectural Heritage of Laois were held throughout July and August and continue to grow in popularity. For Children's Book Festival there were story sessions, craft workshops, and visiting authors included Anna Carey, Kieran-Mark Crowley and Claire Hennessy.

Mountmellick Library

Mountmellick Library has had a busy schedule of events in 2015. The library has become a great success since opening and is now a central attraction to the community in Mountmellick and surrounding areas. There have been weekly class visits, bookclubs for adults and children, knitting club, storytime and weekly games clubs. Highlights of the year included; Arts and Crafts workshops with artist Caroline Keane in May and Carnation Theatre performance in August.

The Art Gallery was fully booked for 2015 with exhibitions by Joe Ryan, Gemma Lalor and Caroline Conway, as well as local art groups from Geashill and Mountmellick.

EU Direct Centre in Mountmellick Library

Mountmellick library continued as one of eight EU Direct(EDIC) Information Centres in the Country. The in-

formation Centre which is based in the Public area of the library acts as a one stop shop for people who want information about the EU, such as policies, information or citizens rights. The centre also hosts EU events and related activities and in 2015 over 30 EU themed events and talks were hosted in the library promoting the centre and Europe.

Performance Indicators 2014

Library Visits

No. of visits to libraries per 1,000 population area per the 2011 census	3,652.6
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Cost of operating a library service

Cost per 1,000 population	€23,952.52
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HERITAGE

The Heritage Office of Laois County Council works to promote awareness and understanding of the built, natural and cultural heritage of County Laois. This is undertaken with the assistance of the Heritage Council, through delivery of the projects detailed in the Laois Heritage Plan.

Laois Heritage Plan 2014 - 2019

The third Heritage Plan for Laois was adopted in January 2014 and its implementation is ongoing. The Heritage Plan is a partnership plan written and implemented by the Heritage Forum, a group representing all groups with an interest in heritage in Laois. The plan is supported by Laois County Council and the Heritage Council.

The current Laois Heritage Plan contains 50 actions which will be implemented over the coming years, under five key objective areas:

- Increase understanding of the heritage of Laois
- Record the Heritage of Laois
- Protect and promote active conservation of the heritage of Laois
- Promote community participation on heritage plans and projects
- Promote enjoyment and accessibility of heritage

Projects from the Heritage Plan 2014-2019 were delivered in 2015

The following information relates to projects from the Laois Heritage Plan undertaken with the support of the Heritage Council, Laois Partnership and others during 2015.

1. Increase understanding of the heritage of Laois

In 2015, the Heritage Officer worked with numerous individuals and community groups to plan heritage projects and provide advice on accessing grant aid and project support. In order to ensure wide dissemination of heritage information, all reports and publications produced during the year have been lodged in the local studies section of Laois County Library and made available to download on the Laois County Council website.

Laois 2016

As part of the programme to commemorate the centenary of the 1916 Rising, a Commemorations Committee was formed in Laois, and a plan for the Laois 2016 Commemorations published. A community grants scheme was operated in 2015 and a further scheme will run in 2016, to promote and support community events and projects to commemorate this important era in Irish history. Projects will be held in various topics including education and youth, historical reflection, cultural activities etc.

Heritage Awareness Events

Events held during 2015 to raise awareness of heritage issues included:

- Support was given to a Community Biodiversity Day in Mountmellick for Biodiversity Week in May;
- A week-long programme of over 60 family events, guided walks, talks, slideshows and fun days was organized for national Heritage Week in August;
- The Heritage Office assisted with the development of the Laois Heritage Society Schools Heritage Project, a competition for primary and secondary schools, organised in association with the Laois Education Centre;
- The Heritage Officer was involved with the organisation of the Laois Marquee for the National Ploughing Championships and attended the event. Free workshops on variety of themes, including wildlife, science,

architecture, archaeology, music and art were offered to the public throughout the three days, and these were very successful.

- Science Week in November was very successful with a range of events and public talks. Schools workshops were held in Stradbally and Abbeyleix with the assistance of Discover Science and Engineering. Primary schools from each town took part in energy awareness and comets workshops and lots of fun was had amongst the learning.
- The James Fintan Lalor School took place at the Dunamais Arts Centre in Portlaoise in October 2015 and was very successful. All aspects of the event were well received by the public, press and all speakers etc involved.

Connecting Communities with Heritage Project

This project involved connecting local people with their very local heritage, across four strands:

- Tidy Towns and **Biodiversity**. Three training sessions were held on local biodiversity and five Local Biodiversity Action Plans were published.
- **Architecture** of Laois – A six-lecture Seminar series on the Architecture of Laois was hosted in Portlaoise Library.
- **Folklore** – Three folklore workshops were held in libraries, and a book on the Folktales of Laois was published and launched during Heritage Week.
- **Commemoration**
 - Quakers: A plaque was erected at former Quaker burial ground in Mountrath
 - Science heritage: A plaque to the memory of Thomas Prior (One of the founders of the RDS, and a Rathdowney native) has been manufactured and will be unveiled at the Church of Ireland in Rathdowney in April 2016.
 - Biddy Aghaboe: A bilingual plaque to mark Biddy Aghaboe's well is manufactured and will be erected at the site on the Mountrath Road in Portlaoise.
 - Col James Fitzmaurice: A joint commemorative event was held with the Irish Air Corps and the UN Veterans Association to honour this Portlaoise native who was a member of the the first flight crew to cross the Atlantic from east to west, on

the 50th Anniversary of his death.

Book on the Rock of Dunamaise

A book on the heritage of the Rock of Dunamase is being written, for publication in 2017. This is the second phase of a four-year project. Text and reconstruction drawings have been delivered. Further research and photography will take place in coming years.

2. Record the Heritage of Laois

The collection and presentation of information on the heritage of Laois is a necessary first step in the conservation and highlighting of this heritage. The following heritage projects were carried out during 2015:

Guide to the Architecture of mid-Leinster

Support has continued for research on the architecture of Laois for a new book in the prestigious "Pevsner Guide" series, published by Yale University Press, on the architecture of Laois, Offaly and Kildare. The Laois element of this project is now complete, and the "Buildings of Mid Leinster" volume will be published in 2016.

3. Protect and promote active conservation of the heritage of Laois

Borris in Ossory Courthouse

Funding was obtained from the Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht to do some conservation work at Borris in Ossory Courthouse. This focused on cleaning the stonework using a conservation technique, and repair of railings and rainwater goods. This was completed in 2015.

Killabban Church

Conservation of masonry was undertaken at Killabban Church in South Laois, with the assistance of the Heritage Council and organised by the local community.

4. Promote community participation in heritage plans and projects

Timahoe Round Tower

The Conservation Plan for Timahoe Monastic Site, commissioned by the local community, will be published in early 2016, and implemented in the coming years.

Lea Castle

The Preliminary Report on Lea Castle, co-ordinated by the local community with assistance from the Heritage Officer, was published in 2015. With the support of the Heritage Council, geophysical research around the site of the medieval settlement was carried out, and they will inform future research and conservation work at the site.

Fort of Maryborough

Stage I of a conservation management plan was commissioned by Laois Heritage Society for this site in 2015, with funding from the Heritage Council. It is intended that the plan will be completed and implemented in the coming years, subject to availability of funding.

5. Promote enjoyment and accessibility of heritage

Audioguides to Heritage sites in Laois

The "Story of Laois" audioguides now comprise 6 individual guides to various aspect of the heritage of Laois and were created in partnership with Laois Tourism and funded by Laois Partnership. Guides to date include the Rock of Dunamaise, Monastic Laois, the Laois Heritage Trail, the historic towns of Abbeyleix, Portlaoise and Portarlington. The guides can be downloaded for free at www.abartaaudioguides.ie.

A major project to translate the guides to various European languages and to put them together in a smartphone app will be undertaken in 2016, with the assistance of Fáilte Ireland, through the "Ireland's Ancient East" scheme.

Biodiversity at Páirc an Phobail Portlaoise

A major refurbishment project took place at the town park in Portlaoise during 2015 and as part of this, information panels on the wildlife and habitats of the park were installed along with a bilingual tree trail. Information panels on the rookery adjacent to the park are in preparation, in association with the Irish Wildlife Trust Laois-Offaly Branch. Several wildlife days for children were organised as part of the relaunch of the park.

Transportation, Environment & Emergency Services Strategic Policy Committee

Director of Services: Kieran Kehoe

Chairperson: Jerry Lodge, M.C.C.

Members	Sectoral
Ben Brennan, M.C.C.	Michael Kielty, I.C.T.U. (Trade Union)
John King, M.C.C.	John Fitzpatrick, (Farming)
Noel Tuohy, M.C.C.	Chris Callaghan (Development/ Construction)
Seamus McDonald, M.C.C.	Kitty Creighton (Environment/ Conservation)
	Ger Mulhall (Business/ Commercial)

ROADS

Senior Engineer: Henry Ritchie, Roads & Environment

2015 Road Grant Allocations

In 2015 the Roads Department secured €11.6 million funding as follows:-

- €7.1 million from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTaS),
- €0.6 million from Transport Infrastructure Ireland (formerly the NRA),
- €1.8 million in Revenue & €2.1 million in Capital funding from Laois County Council's own resources.

Capital Schemes

Borris Road, Portlaoise

Phase 4 of this scheme was substantially completed in 2014. In 2015 a number of remaining landowner and accommodation issues were progressed to a satisfactory conclusion.

Portlaoise Junction Upgrades

Following a rigorous public consultation exercise, a Part VIII Planning Application was approved by the Elected Members at the February meeting for the construction of roundabouts at four junctions in Port-

laoise at the following locations:-

- Stradbally Road / Block Road,
- Stradbally Road / Southern Circular Road (Summerhill),
- Dublin Road / Block Road,
- Dublin Road / Fielbrook.

These upgrades will increase capacity, lessen delays and provide enhanced facilities for pedestrians & cyclists.

Works commenced on site on the Stradbally Road as the school holidays were commencing and were completed by the start of September. Works then moved to the Dublin Road and these junctions were completed prior to Christmas.



Carlow Northern Relief Road

Subsequent to initial discussions with NAMA in 2014, land acquisition negotiations were successfully concluded in 2015 with NAMA and the Receivers of Fruithill Manor in Graiguecullen to enable the extension to the Carlow Northern Relief Road between the Castlecomer and Numbers Roads to be progressed. The scheme was designed and procured in-house by Road Design and a contract for the 750m extension was awarded in late summer. Construction commenced during September and was greatly assisted by the favourable autumn weather. In December an extension to the contract was agreed which allowed for the widening and upgrade of a further 200m of the Numbers Road into Carlow. The scheme is scheduled for completion by Easter 2016.

Durrow Square

Works to enhance and regenerate Durrow Square were completed in 2015. This capital project was funded through contributions from the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government; Laois County Council and the Durrow Square Regen-

eration Scheme. Works included: the undergrounding of utilities, installation of limestone kerbing, ornate public lighting, provision of a bus shelter, new street furniture; and the construction of paved footways and road reconstruction providing clearly demarked car parking.



N80 Coolanowle to Maidenhead Realignment, Arles

In 2015 Laois County Council and Kildare National Roads Office progressed the environmental, road design, safety and land acquisition elements for this 2km realignment of the N80 near Arles. Legal advisors were also appointed in late 2015. Technical and engineering reports have been submitted for legal review ahead of the scheme being submitted to An Bord Pleanála for planning approval.

Portlaoise Southern Circular Route

Sections of the circular route around the periphery of Portlaoise have progressed down the years. With the completion of a final section of the route between the Abbeyleix and Timahoe Roads, there will be an effective N80 Bypass of Portlaoise Town Centre and the JFL Avenue.

Discussions progressed earlier in 2015 with the NRA in relation to the Authority funding completion of the missing link as that would enable further consideration be given to the re-designation of the Western and Southern Circular Routes as the N80. However, initial modeling indicated limited benefit to 'national through traffic' diverting off the current route and the NRA requested that further more in depth modeling be carried out before any further consideration could be given to it being developed as a national scheme.

Separate to this in September, the completion of the Portlaoise Southern Circular Route was identified for funding under the Government's Capital Programme 2016 – 2021 through the Department of Transport,

Tourism and Sport. Consultants were re-engaged on the scheme and works commenced in late 2015 on revised route selection. Cognisance needs to be taken of the adjacent ESB 110kV sub-station and detailed liaison is ongoing with ESB Networks and ESBI.

Lyster Square, Portlaoise

In 2015 consultants were procured and initial scheme concepts tabled to the Portlaoise Municipal District for the upgrade of Lyster Square, Portlaoise. The aim of the scheme is to enhance the character of the Square and make it a more welcoming environment for shoppers, pedestrians and other vulnerable road users.

MAINTENANCE SCHEMES

Road Restoration Improvement and Pavement Maintenance

MapRoad Pavement Management System

In 2015 survey work was completed so that every public road segment in the county now has a Pavement Survey Condition Index (PSCI) rating recorded between 1 (very poor) to 10 (excellent) on the MapRoad GIS (Geographic Information System) database. This enables a record of the condition of the road to be maintained and updated if works take place. It is also a mechanism to enable the DTTaS and Laois County Council prioritise future works.

National Roads

National Secondary resurfacing schemes to specifically enhance the skidding resistance of the road pavement were completed at 13 sites on the N80 and N78 routes. Funding was provided by Transport Infrastructure Ireland and the total length of road resurfaced was approximately 4km.

In 2015, Transport Infrastructure Ireland also funded upgrades to footpaths in Portlaoise, Mountmellick and Arles along the N80.

Regional and Local Roads

Roads Area staff supported by Road Design carried out pavement strengthening and surface dressing of regional and local roads under the roads programme. 39km of our network at 49 locations was strengthened while 16km of road was surface dressed at 20 sites. This in total represented approximately 2.5% of the county road network total.

One of the larger strengthening schemes was carried out at Davitt Road, Acragar, Mountmellick where works on 800m of full width carriageway reconstruction were progressed to include significant drainage works.

During the first half of 2015, repairs were carried out at nine locations in the south-east of the county in the general areas of Ballickmoyler, Killeslin, Maidenhead and Arles arising out of damage caused by flash flooding in November 2014. Laois County Council made a successful application to the DTTaS for emergency funding in late 2014. Works included those to both road pavements and structures together with new drainage infrastructure.

As in previous years, Laois County Council carried out weekly maintenance works on all public roads in the county. These works included drainage works, verge trimming, footpath repairs, erection and replacement of signs, relining, the provision of studs, replacement of damaged safety barriers, street cleaning and litter collection.

Structures

Bridge Rehabilitation Works were carried out at three locations as part of Bridge Improvement and Strengthening Works in 2015 at:-

- Castletown Bridge, Ballylunan;
- Convent Bridge, Mountmellick; and



- Forest Bridge, Mountrath.

Upgrade works to the Irish Rail bridge and approach embankment over the Dublin to Cork Railway were completed on the R433 at Lisduff, Errill.

Low Cost Safety Schemes

Low Cost Safety Schemes were progressed at sites across the county including:-

- Aghmacart Crossroads, Cullahill,



- R422, Mountmellick,
- Brandra Crossroads, Abbeyleix,
- Rosskelton, Trumera,
- Hermitage Cross, Jamestown,
- Sleaty Road, Graiguecullen,
- Kennels Cross, Emo,
- Wolfhill Bends, Swan,
- Oldtown Crossroads, Durrow .

Works varied across the sites and included junction improvements, traffic calming measures, public lighting improvements, footpath provision, pedestrian crossing facilities, signage and improvements in road geometry.

Speed detection signs with variable message displays were installed at 15 locations indicating motorists' speeds within 60km/hr and 50km/hr zones. These prove very effective in alerting motorists to their speed and encouraging them to slow down.

Public Lighting

The Authority also funded the upgrade of a pedestrian crossing in Portlaoise and public lighting upgrades utilising energy efficient LED lighting technology. These lighting schemes were located in Abbeyleix and Durrow where 4km of lights were upgraded.

Speed Limit Review

The National Speed Limit Review was originally launched back in 2014 by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. In 2015 an extensive data gathering exercise was completed to upload the details of all existing speed limits and associated signage onto the MapRoad Pavement Management System interface. A review of all housing estates in the county was carried out to provide a comprehensive listing for the implementation of 30km/hr slow zones to each estate.

As part of the consultative process with statutory agencies and the public, advertisements were placed in the local and national press seeking inputs.

Winter Maintenance

Winter Maintenance operations were carried out on 76 occasions during the 2014/2015 winter season treating 400km of the salted network in Laois. Approximately 2,850 tonnes of salt were spread during the period. At the start of the 2015/2016 season in October 2015, an additional 13% or 50km was added to the treated network increasing the distances salted to approximately 450km. The last three months of 2015 were exceptionally mild and routes were only treated on seven occasions to the end of the year.

Laois County Council also took delivery of a new larger 26 tonne three axle lorry and a new larger 9m³ salt spreader in October of 2015 enabling increased distances of our network to be gritted.

Cycle Safety Training

600 primary school students, from 11 national schools took part in the Safe Cycle Training programme throughout the county, with 20 children taking part in the Annual Road Safety Event held during national Bike Week.

Drive For Life Programme

This road safety and awareness programme for secondary school students continued in 2015.

Road Safety Talks/Visits

The Road Safety Officer visits to primary school took place during the year to promote road safety education.

Hi-Visibility Vests

Hi-visibility vest's, arm bands, stickers and school bag dangles were supplied to children during school visits and to various organizations on request.

Performance Indicators 2014

Percentage (based on length) of both regional and local roads whose PSCI condition has been recorded as at 31/12/2014

	Regional	Local
Overall %	87	73

Ratings in Pavement Surface Condition Index

Percentage of both regional, local primary, local secondary and local tertiary road surfaces in each of the 10 PSCI rating categories

	Regional	Local Primary	Local Secondary	Local Tertiary
Category 1	0	0	0	1
Category 2	0	1	2	3
Category 3	2	3	3	5
Category 4	9	13	13	15
Category 5	13	15	16	17
Category 6	20	29	25	16
Category 7	15	19	21	19
Category 8	18	15	14	9
Category 9	16	4	6	13
Category 10	6	1	0	2

ENVIRONMENT

Senior Engineer: Henry Ritchie, Roads & Environment

Community Initiatives

Clean Up Laois Week

Now in its 12th year, Clean up Laois Week continues to grow from strength to strength. It is run in conjunction with An Taisce's National Spring Clean Campaign. Bags, gloves and litter pickers were provided by Laois County Council to approximately 95 registered groups. AES collected the resulting bags of rubbish along with the Litter Wardens; John Ging, John Rogers and Emily Doyle. In total, 17.4 tonnes of waste was collected throughout the week. Well done to all involved, it would not be possible without the voluntary commitment of the Laois Tidy Towns, Residents Associations, Local Businesses and individuals involved.

Grant Schemes

Under the Community Grant Scheme 2015, funding was awarded to 77 groups for projects to benefit the environment and enhance local amenities. The application form for the local Tidy Towns Grant schemes changed to reflect the categories in the National competition with a view to assisting groups secure funding for specific projects in their areas. 27 committees applied for and received funding to the value of €20,000. Projects funded included community orchard, community garden, water conservation and biodiversity.

16 grant recipients received funding under the Local Agenda21 grant scheme to the value of €19,000. This is cofounded by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government and Laois County Council. Projects cover such topics as education and awareness programmes on rainwater harvesting, composting, reuse, biodiversity and how to help groups recruit new volunteers. Projects must be completed by April 2016.

Tidy Towns

In 2015, a dedicated Tidy Towns Facilitator, based in the Environment Section was appointed to assist the Laois Federation of Tidy Towns Groups. A variety of additional workshops and talks were provided with a view to benefitting the Tidy Towns committees. It was a great year for national medal winners coming from Laois as Abbeylisk achieved Gold Medal status while Ballacolla, Castletown and Portlaoise achieved Silver

Medal status and Clonaslee achieved Bronze Medal status. Shanahoe also received an endeavour award. The Council were delighted with this result but noted that all groups improved on previous year's competition results. It was a great achievement for everyone involved and their local communities.



5 more Tidy Towns committees (Attanagh, Clonaslee, Mountrath, Portlaoise and Shanahoe) also commenced work on a Local Biodiversity Action Plan with the assistance of Dr Fiona MacGowan, Consultant Ecologist. The project was funded by Laois County Council's Environment and Heritage Sections and the Heritage Council.



National Tree Week

ESB in conjunction with Coillte and the Tree Council of Ireland sponsor the supply of saplings to community groups throughout the country. In 2015 Laois County Council donated over 100 trees to community groups, Tidy Towns and resident associations from all over Laois in support of ESB Tree week. Native varieties Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*) and Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) were the species used this year.

Litter Management

During 2015, Elected Members adopted a new 3 year Litter Management Plan which focuses on litter prevention and control measures and also identifies key

performance indicators which ensure that we are reaching those targets. Annual updates will be provided to the Elected Members (March) on projects which help to deliver the targets set in the Plan.



797 complaints were received and investigated during 2015 and appropriate action was taken. Every effort is made to ensure focus is on litter prevention first, by promoting awareness campaigns, but unfortunately, it is also necessary to issue litter fines when breaches of the Litter Pollution Act, as amended, occurs. Our lo-call litter hotline 1850 323230 is still in operation and receives complaints on a weekly basis. Other complaints are received through our facebook page, email and people reporting litter offences in person. Enforcement of the litter laws resulted in 171 litter fines issued for various littering offences with legal proceeding initiated in respect of 41 offences resulting in 16 successful convictions in court. In situations where private landowners failed to keep their property litter free, 6 no. Section 9 Notices were issued. In addition, numerous warning letters were sent relating to unauthorised signage and abandoned vehicles.

Our Litter Wardens also participate in the annual National Litter Pollution Monitoring System (NLPMS) collecting data on the composition, scale and nature of littering which is used to clearly identify problem areas at an early stage.

Portlaoise received 'moderately littered status' in the 2015 IBAL competition due to two sites which have since been addressed. Our participation in this competition remains an ongoing priority.

Gum Litter Taskforce

The Environment Section participated locally in the National Gum Litter Taskforce again in 2015. This initiative incorporates an element of awareness, enforcement and conducting surveys for monitoring purposes.

Waste Enforcement

The Waste Enforcement Section is committed to maintaining and improving the high quality environment for the people of County Laois through the enforcement of Waste Legislation and Regulation. This Section has had a successful year in resolving waste complaints and meeting the requirements of its Environmental Inspection Plan.

A Review of Waste Facility Permit sites and the issuing of new permits within the required timeframe is a priority. The Waste Facility Permit Register in 2015 contains 25 sites which hold a valid Waste Facility Permit/Certificate of Registration authorisation.

The Section works closely with its colleagues in Planning Enforcement to resolve cases where there is a breach of legislation. In line with the regional unauthorised waste enforcement group, set up as part of the Enforcement Network, information on the operations of illegal waste collectors and the illegal activities of holders of waste collector permits may be exchanged where appropriate.

Scheduled routine and non routine inspections are carried out. Non Routine Inspections include all complaints relating to waste and air pollution complaints concerning burning. Inspections also include Planning Permission/applications as required. This Section received 93 waste complaints in 2015 all of which were successfully dealt with. 67 Planning Referrals were inspected and appropriate conditions forwarded to Planning.

Environment Awareness Initiatives

It was a busy 2015 for environmental awareness programmes which included the following projects/campaigns:

- Providing free mobile WEEE recycling collections in Ballybrittas, Ballylinan, Castletown, Cullohill, Killenard, Killeshin and Vicarstown.
- Teacher training workshops on Green Schools programme
- Free workshops for schools on a variety of topics including biodiversity, litter and waste management.
- Administering LA21 Grants total project value of €19,000.
- The importance of protecting and conserving our environment was also the focus of our information stand at the National Ploughing Championships, Ratheniska, Co Laois. During our time at this event, over 1,500 people visited our stand to speak with us

about composting, recycling and our innovative schools programmes.

- 4 venues were set up for Stop Food Waste workshops with four meetings held in each venue, focusing on how households can save up to €700/year by employing simple suggestions as menu planning, portion size and shopping wisely.
- A Food Waste Prevention cookery demonstration was held in Portlaoise with celebrity chef Catherine Fulvio attended by over 200 people.
- CCTV at 4 bring bank sites around the county assisted the Council in enforcing the Litter Pollution Act, as amended.

Páirc an Phobail, Portlaoise

In October 2015, after 9 months of extensive work, the four hectare park located on the Timahoe Road was reopened by Cathaoirleach Catherine Fitzgerald and Minister Charlie Flanagan TD.

Refurbishment of the park was partly inspired by Portlaoise's involvement in the 2014 Healthy Towns initiative at a cost of €150,000. The park now boasts an outdoor gymnasium, an outdoor classroom, natural play features, a woodland walk consisting of bird and bat boxes and a fairy trail, an orienteering trail and a bilingual tree trail. Footpaths around the park were also resurfaced and more than 1km of pathways are now available for walkers and joggers.

Representatives from the Irish Times/Pfizer Healthy Town initiative and Healthy Ireland, part of the Department of Health also provided funding towards the programme. Part funding for the tree trail and signage was provided by the Heritage Council.

At the official opening ceremony, attended by numerous local schools, members of the community, Tidy Towns, Downtown Portlaoise and Portlaoise Men's Shed, three local people spoke about the importance of parks in their lives. These included two young pupils from the Gaelscoil in Portlaoise – Ashlinn Ní Leathlobhair and Aaron Ó Murchú and Margaret Dempsey from the town's active retirement group.

The purpose of the works, spearheaded by an in house committee lead by Denise Rainey, was to ensure that Páirc an Phobail would be a revised focal point for the town, making it an attractive destination for all visitors while at the same time highlighting its many uses, including the new educational aspect. Results of survey work conducted by local schools and the Laois Offaly branch of the Irish Wildlife Trust,

was used for the signage, which outlined the wildlife aspects of the park.

Eastern & Midlands Region Waste Management Plan 2015-2021

The plan was launched in May, 2015 and counties included in this region are Laois, Dublin City, Fingal, Dun Laoghaire, South Dublin, Longford, Westmeath, Kildare, Offaly, Louth, Meath & Wicklow. Dublin City Council is the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authority. This region has a population of 2,249,603 and the plan provides a framework for waste management & identifies a range of targets and objectives, supported by policies and actions required to achieve these targets and objectives such as:

- Preparing for a reuse & recycling rate of 50% of municipal waste by 2020.
- Reduce to 0% the direct disposal of unprocessed residual municipal waste to land fill (from 2016 onwards) in favour of higher value pre-treatment processes and indigenous recovery practices.

Three new Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities (WERLA's) have been appointed with responsibility for co-ordinating waste enforcement actions within regions, setting priorities and common objectives for waste enforcement, ensuring the consistent enforcement of waste legislation across the three existing waste management planning regions while still leaving local authority staff as first responders to specific breaches of waste legislation.

Midlands Energy Agency

The main energy users in Laois County Council are public lighting and buildings. The remainder of energy consumption relates to natural gas, oil and fuel for fleet vehicles. The SEAI Annual Report 2015 on Public Sector Energy Efficiency Performance reports that Laois County Council made a 10.2% saving by the end of 2014 against their 33% target by 2020. Midlands Energy Agency undertook a range of actions in 2015 to promote energy efficiency in the region:

- A Midland Regional Energy Seminar event providing information on forms of renewable energy was organised by the Midlands Energy Agency (MEA) in partnership with the SEAI. The seminar was supported by the LEO's, IFA, Macra na Feirme, Enterprise Ireland and Irish Hotels Federation.



- Local Authority Renewal Energy Strategy (LARES) training was hosted by the MEA in conjunction with the SEAI for local authority planning & professional staff.
- Energy MAP training has been rolled out for Energy Teams in local authorities supported by the SEAI.
- Participated in the SEAI Community of Practice Energy Training for Leisure Centre Managers and supported applications for funding under the Local Authority Swimming Pool Programme.

In addition, Laois County Council undertook a range of initiatives to improve their energy performance, including:

- Laois County Council, through its participation in a National Working Group on Public Lighting, has been chosen as one of 5 pilot local authorities to compile a standardised Public Lighting Inventory in 2015/2016 and will receive grant aid from the SEAI of €37,500 to support this work.
 - A retrofit of 96 lights with energy efficient LED's in the town of Abbeyleix was funded by the NRA.
- As part of the Durrow Square Redevelopment, 31 lights were retrofitted with LED's.
- Participating in the OPW Optimising Power@ Work programme at County Hall, Portlaoise. Gas & electricity meters have been installed to monitor energy usage and an ongoing energy awareness programme is running.
- Reduced the MIC for Donaghmore Workhouse & the Old Shaws building to change tariff and achieve savings.

Performance Indicators 2014

No. of waste facility permits or certs of Registration in effect

The no. of waste operators that have been licensed by the local authority to operate in its area 26

No./% of households with access to a 3 bin service

The no. of households, based on the 2011 Census, who are situated in an area covered by a licensed operator providing a 3 bin service 5972

The % of households within the area (also as per the 2011 Census) that the number at A represents 21.39%

No. of waste complaints lodged with EPA Office of Environmental Enforcement

The no. of distinct complaints relating to waste within the area that were referred to the OEE because the problem persisted after investigation of the complaint by the Local Authority 1

% of other (i.e. not waste) environmental pollution complaints closed

Total no. of cases in respect of which a complaint was made through any medium whether instigated by the public or by the local authority itself and the % of those cases closed

% litter complaint cases closed	95.68%
% Air complaint cases closed	85.71%
% Noise complaint cases closed	66.67%
% Water complaint cases closed	82.46%

% of local authority area within the 5 levels of litter pollution

The % of the area within the local authority that when surveyed was unpolluted or litter free	10
slightly polluted	87
moderately polluted	3
significantly polluted	0
grossly polluted	0

WATER SERVICES

Senior Engineer: Michael O'Hora, Water Services

Irish Water was established on 1st of January, 2014 under the Water Services Act 2013. From that date Laois County Council continued to provide public water and wastewater services to the people of County Laois, in collaboration with Irish Water, through a Service Level Agreement (SLA) and in accordance with an agreed Annual Service Plan (ASP). All public water and waste water contracts were transferred from Laois County Council to Irish Water on 1st January 2014.

Water services are 100% funded by Irish Water, who are now the Statutory Authority for water services and all major decisions around funding of services will be approved by Irish Water. The Local Authority, under an excluded provision in the Act, remains the Water Services Authority in connection with Group Schemes and domestic wastewater treatment systems (septic tanks).

The delivery of Water Services under the SLA, although challenging, is an opportunity to retain a level of water services activity within Local Government and to influence water services investment and policy in the future.

Work is currently underway to design a Water Industry Operating Framework for Local Authorities and Irish Water working in collaboration. The Water Industry Operating Framework (WIOF) will put in place an industry structure to operate efficiently, effectively, responsibly and cohesively under the SLA agreement.

The Water Services Laboratory applied to INAB for accreditation to ISO17025 for drinking water check parameters plus nitrates. The laboratory was successful in November in their pre-assessment for INAB Accreditation and the full assessment of the laboratory will proceed in 2016.

Public Water and Wastewater service delivery

Ongoing Operation and Maintenance

Laois County Council currently supplies approximately 24,000 cubic meters of water per day to the people of County Laois on behalf of Irish Water, through the provision and maintenance of adequate water supplies (92 water sites) and wastewater treatment and disposal facilities (78 waste water sites),

which comply with both the EU Drinking Water Directive and EU Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive.

Unaccounted for WATER (UFW) in County Laois at 45% is comparable with the national figures. While the progression of watermain rehabilitation contracts will reduce mains leakage on a number of schemes, the introduction of domestic water metering will potentially provide the biggest impact on UFW.



Drinking Water Quality

Irish Water has statutory functions with regard to the monitoring of public drinking water supplies as laid out in the EU (Drinking Water) Regulations, 2014. Results of analysis of drinking water in 2015 shows that Public Water Schemes in Laois had a 100% microbiological compliance rate and 99.9% chemical compliance rate.

Under the Regulations, Laois County Council is also the Supervisory Authority for Private Group Water Schemes and Small Private Water Supply Schemes. Results of analysis of drinking water for 2015 show that Private Group Water Schemes were 100% compliant with microbiological parameters and 99.8% compliance with chemical parameters. Small Private Water Supplies Schemes had a 100% chemical compliance rate and 99.2% microbiological compliance rate.

Discharges to Sewers

There are 111 Section 16 Discharge Licences issued under the Local Government (Water Pollution) Act 1977 and 1990, to businesses to discharge trade effluent to sewers in the county and the Council monitor these on a regular basis throughout the year.

EPA Waste Water Discharge Licence

Laois County Council operates Wastewater Treat-

ment Plants on behalf of Irish Water in accordance with Certificates of Authorisation or Discharge Licences from the EPA under the Wastewater Discharge (Authorisation) Regulations 2007. These licences and certificates stipulate conditions to ensure compliance with water quality standards and EU Environmental Directives. To date discharge licences have been granted for fourteen plants. Certificates have been obtained for fifteen small treatment plants in the county.

Environmental Protection

Environmental Protection staff are involved in the implementation of legislation and policy regarding river water and groundwater quality, air quality and noise pollution as they apply in County Laois.

Water Quality

Laois County Council continued in 2015 to implement the South Eastern River Basin District and Shannon International River Basin District Management Plans 2009 - 2015. The current plan will now extend to 2017, after which a revised plan will come into operation.

Fifty-eight Nutrient Management Plans concerning the spreading of Sewage Sludge in the county were submitted to the Council for approval in 2015.

The Council continued to monitor discharge licences to rivers and groundwaters in 2015 under Section 4 of the Local Government (Water Pollution) Acts 1977 to 1990. A total of forty-four samples were taken and analysed to ensure compliance with licences. Nine licences were operational in 2015 and two are expected to commence in 2016.

The Council also inspected septic tanks in accordance with the EPA's National Inspection Plan 2015 - 2017 for Domestic Waste Water Treatment Systems. A total of twenty-three inspections were carried out in 2015, as required by the Plan.

Laois County Council investigated all complaints received concerning water pollution in the County. One Notice was issued under Section 12 of the Local Government (Water Pollution) Acts 1977 to 1990.

Air Quality

There were no active Air Emissions Licenses in the county in 2015. Forty complaints were received and investigated in 2015 concerning air quality. The nature of these complaints included agricultural odour

problems and smoke nuisance.

Noise Pollution

Thirteen noise complaints were received in 2015. Some of these complaints were domestic in nature and in these cases the Council encourages neighbours to discuss the problem between themselves and to come to an agreed solution. Other complaints concerned commercial activities in the County.

Water Services Capital Investment Programme

From 2014, Irish Water have funded all Water Services Capital Projects. Projects in progress at that date will be completed, but commencement of new projects will be at the discretion of Irish Water.

The overriding purpose of the Laois County Water Conservation Project is to conserve water by the identification and rehabilitation of those areas of the water main infrastructure yielding the greatest sustainable water savings.

The Laois County Water Conservation Project Stage 3 – Contract No. 1 involved the replacement of 13km of watermains that were beyond the point of economical repair, had high leakage and prone to frequent bursting. The contract was awarded to David Walsh Civil Engineering Ltd. and was completed in February 2015. The contract value was €1,960,444. Tenders for consultancy services to prepare designs for a further 8.5km of watermains replacement under Contract No. 2 were issued in September 2015.

The 'Laois Grouped Towns Sewerage Scheme (DBO Contract)' was awarded in June 2013 to Response Engineering Ltd/ Ward & Burke Ltd joint venture. This scheme involved the construction of new wastewater treatment plants in 5 Towns (Abbeyleix, Durrow, Stradbally, Rathdowney, Mountrath). The contract value was €11,439,869. All new plants came into operation in 2015 and a 20 year operations service commenced.

The 'Laois Grouped Towns Sewerage Scheme (Network Contract)' was awarded in October 2013 to Ward & Burke Ltd. This scheme involved the construction of new sewer networks in 6 towns (Abbeyleix, Durrow, Stradbally, Rathdowney, Mountrath, Clonaslee). The contract value was €7,359,233. Works were completed by April 2015.

The Portarlinton Water Supply Improvement Scheme Advanced Contract at La Bergerie wellfield was issued to tender in August 2015. The works in-

clude bringing a third borehole of the wellfield into production and provision of a building housing chlorine, fluoride and manganese treatment facilities. A 12 month Design & Build contract with a 12 month operations service is expected to be awarded by April 2016.

The Portarlington Wastewater Treatment Plant Upgrade contract was issued to tender in October 2015. A Waste Water Discharge Licence for the plant was issued by the EPA in January 2015. The works include improvements and upgrades at the plant to achieve effluent standards compliance and energy efficiencies. A 7 month Design & Build contract with a 12 month operations service is expected to be awarded by May 2016.

In 2015, several minor capital projects commenced including the provision of Ultra Violet Disinfection on the Ballyroan Water Treatment Plant, Reservoirs Refurbishment contract, Flow Monitoring and Sampling installation at 6 Wastewater Treatment Plants and installation of Cryptosporidium sampling at a number of Water Treatment Plants.

There was a requirement at Ballyroan Water Treatment Plant (WTP) to provide adequate UV treatment system to provide continuous disinfection on both supplies (Tullore Spring & Cross of Newtown Bored Well) to the WTP. A duty standby system was installed with the ability to provide inactivation of Cryptosporidium, bacteria and viruses. Associated equipment was also installed to show continuous validation of the proposed UV treatment system and allow for connection to the county wide telemetry.



Further submissions in the form of Assets Needs Briefs were made to Irish Water in 2015 for a range

of water and wastewater capital projects. Pending approvals by Irish Water these projects are expected to be progressed in 2016.

Rural Water Programme

Laois County Council continues to administer the improvement or upgrade works for existing and new Group Schemes. Funding by the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government allowed for extensive works to be carried out in the Group Water Sector in 2015.

The Takeover Programme is managed by the Council staff. Works were completed and the final account paid on eleven separate schemes. These schemes in addition to a number of others, are now in a position to be taken over by Irish Water in accordance with and when the Proposed Memorandum of Understanding is finalised.

A project to tackle the issue of orphan group water schemes and the eventual takeover of same continued in 2015. Works were carried out on seven separate schemes including Phase I of the mains replacement project on the Clonking/Fermoyle Group Water Scheme.

All of these works have progressed the Council's aims to assist the group schemes in the County to maintain a high quality water supply in line with EU drinking water quality standards and also to reduce energy and operating costs.

Works in the Water Conservation /Network Upgrades category are carried out by the group schemes and funded through a grant scheme managed by the Council. A number of schemes undertook works in 2015 to improve the standard of the water supply to their membership.

Ballacolla Group Water Scheme continued its network upgrade programme, replacing over 1km of critical mains by directional drilling. The scheme also undertook a project to replace a length of defective main serving fifteen customers which has recorded many leaks and numerous emergency repairs in recent years. Errill GWS had two projects in 2015. UV Disinfection Plant and Monitoring & Alarm System Upgrade and the replacement of 1.5 kms water mains. Cullohill GWS installed and commissioned 160 meters and AMR system and received training on same. The group scheme is also in the process of updating its Zone of Contribution Report in association with GSI. Barrowhouse GWS continued its upgrade programme in 2015 with the installation of kiosks and loggers and fire hydrants. Hygiene works were carried

out to the pumphouse.

Ballymaddock GWS carried out pumphouse upgrade works and fitted fire hydrants and Ironmills GWS upgraded the filtration system.

All of these works have progressed the Council's aims to assist the group schemes in the County maintain a high quality water supply in line with the EU drinking water quality standards and also to reduce energy and operating costs.

The Council's Rural Water Programme also processed approximately €355,855 in subsidies to Group Water Schemes in 2015. The sum of €61,975 was paid to applicants for provision of new or upgrades to their domestic wells in 2015 and one grant under Domestic Waste Water Treatment Systems. This new Scheme is available to assist owners of premises connected to domestic waste water treatment systems with the costs of repairs to and upgrading or replacement of such treatment systems. All payments in respect of these grants and subsidy payments are recouped from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

Reform of the Rural Water Sector

In 2015 the DECLG established a working group involving key stakeholders in the rural water sector to address the overall development of the rural water sector within the overall water sector reform programme. Local Authorities and the National Federation of Group Water Schemes were represented on the group along with the Department, Irish Water and the Water Services Transition Office. One of the tasks of the group is to develop a multi annual approach to funding to meet priority needs of the group water sector and enhance funding certainty to support the proper planning and sustainable development in rural areas.

Public Conveniences

A total of €71,755 was spent on the maintenance and upkeep of the public toilets in Portlaoise and Mountrath.

Dangerous Structures and Places

Under the Local Government (Sanitary Services) Act 1964, Local Authorities are empowered to serve notice on property owners, where in the opinion of the Council a property or place is dangerous, requesting them to carry out remedial action to make the property safe. Failure to comply with the Notice can result in the matter being referred to the Courts. In cases of emergency, the Council is empowered to render such properties safe and to recoup the costs.

A Register of Dangerous Places/Structures is maintained by the local authority and there are currently 44 open files on register in County Laois.

Performance Indicators 2014

Unaccounted for Water as % of total volume of water supplied under an SLA

Unaccounted for water (UFW) as a percentage of total volume supplied (Jan - June 2015)	36%
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Drinking Water in compliance with statutory requirements	
Public	99.6%
Private	97.9%

Performance Indicators 2015

Unaccounted for Water (UFW) as a % of total water supplied under the water supply schemes that the Local Authority is responsible for.)	44.5%
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LAOIS WATER SAFETY

Water Safety Awareness Week 2015

Laois County Council in conjunction with the Laois Water Safety Area Committee delivered a number of key events during Irish Water Safety's annual Water Safety Awareness Week in June 2015.

During this week, 22 school & community group visits were conducted, whereby basic water safety awareness talks and ring buoy demonstrations were delivered.



WATER SAFETY CLASSES & SWIM WEEK 2015

Laois Water Safety successfully delivered Spring and Autumn Water Safety Classes during 2015 at Portlaoise Leisure Centre. 130 participating adults and children received Irish Water Safety Certificates throughout the year. A successful Swim Week programme with kayak skills was also delivered in Ballinakill Outdoor Swimming Pool with 30 children attending in June 2015.

Paws Programme

Laois County Council in association with Laois Water Safety and Portlaoise Leisure Centre continued to successfully support & deliver the Primary Aquatic Water Safety Programme (PAWS). 44 primary schools were visited in County Laois in June and December where over 2,000 children were presented with PAWS Certificates after participating in the Programme.

Ring Buoys

During 2015 Laois County Council continued to maintain and inspect ring buoys at open water locations county wide. Additional signage has been installed at the bridge in Castletown informing people of the dangers of jumping from the bridge into the Rive Nore.

National Ploughing Championships

Laois Water Safety Area Committee members and instructors operated two Irish Water Safety Stands at the National Ploughing Championships. These stands were located in the Department of Environment and HSA compounds. The National Ploughing Championships were held over 3 days where record numbers visited the stand and observed basic life support demonstrations.

LAOIS COUNTY FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Acting Chief Fire Officer: Declan Power

The Fire Service continued to provide a quality service in the areas of Fire Prevention, Fire Brigade Operations, Community Fire Safety Awareness and Major Emergency Planning.

Laois County Fire & Rescue Service attended 774 emergency incidents consisting of 386 fires, 257 special service incidents & 101 false alarms.

To enhance equipment standards, the programme for replacement and updating of equipment was continued in 2015. Our stock of fire fighting foam was re-

newed. New breathing apparatus sets & cylinders, traffic management equipment, road traffic collision & specialist rescue equipment, thermal imaging camera, gas detectors, high pressure lifting bags, vehicle mounted collision warning signs and fire ground communications equipment were provided.

An extensive program of training for operational fire fighters was completed involving over 650 person days.

To enhance Safety, Health and Welfare for fire crews the Standard Operational Guidelines program to implement a set of fire brigade operations continued in 2015. In addition the Health, Safety & Welfare Management Programme was approved by Senior Management and was reviewed 41 times throughout the year.

45 fire safety certificate applications and 112 licensing applications were received, with 89 planning applications also referred to the Fire Service during the year. 181 premises were inspected. 1 Fire Safety Notice which was served on a premises in 2015 with serious fire safety issues still remains in place as remedial works have not been carried out to the satisfaction of the Fire Authority.

1 Closure Notice which was served on a premises in 2012 with serious fire safety issues still remains in place as remedial works have not been carried out to the satisfaction of the fire Authority.

Extensive planning and liaison was carried out with the organisers of the two large outdoor events in the county during 2015 - the Electric Picnic Music Festival in Stradbally (approx 47,000 attended) and the National Ploughing Championships in Ratheniska (approx 220,000 attended) to ensure the safety of all involved. An extensive programme of inspections was put in place for the National Ploughing Championships in Ratheniska – all 1300 plus exhibitors received inspections before and during the event.

The program for National Fire Safety Week included presentations on fire safety to the public in fire stations, attended by people and groups from the local communities, advertising in local newspapers and local radio, use of social media sites facebook and Twitter and leaflets. Check lists for fire safety were also delivered to homes.

The Major Emergency Plan was maintained and updated throughout the year. Training was provided to Council staff in the following areas; Information Management (initial course and refresher course), On-Site Co-ordination, and Media liaison.



Performance Indicators 2014

Cost per capita of the Fire Service

Cost per Capita €50.70

Service Mobilisation

Average time taken, in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in full-time stations in respect of fire N/A

Average time taken, in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in part-time stations (retained fire service) in respect of fire 5.33

Average time taken, in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in full-time stations in respect of all other (non-fire) emergency incidents N/A

Average time taken, in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in part-time stations (retained fire service) in respect of all other (non-fire) emergency incidents 5.33

Percentage of attendances at scenes

% of cases in respect of fire in which first attendance at the scene is within 10 minutes 38.14%

% of cases in respect of fire in which first attendance at the scene is after 10 minutes but within 20 minutes 51.69%

% of cases in respect of fire in which first attendance at the scene is after 20 minutes 10.17%

% of cases in respect of all

other emergency incidents in which first attendance at the scene is within 10 minutes 30.41%

% of cases in respect of all other emergency incidents in which first attendance at the scene is after 10 minutes but within 20 minutes 56.68%

% of cases in respect of all other emergency incidents in which first attendance at the scene is after 20 minutes 12.9%

Laois Civil Defence

Laois Civil Defence is a volunteer based organisation whose members are proud to serve as a high quality back-up service, supporting the primary emergency services and the local community.

Volunteers are multi-skilled and the main programmes of activity undertaken by the organisation are:

First Aid

Provision of first aid and ambulance service.

Rescue Skills

Urban rescue, open country search for missing persons with Laois having one K9 H.R.D. search and rescue dog.

Fire-fighting

Pumping floodwaters and supplying water to the community.

Warden Service and Radiation Monitoring

Radiation detecting and monitoring.

Radio Communications

Operation of four independent radio systems U.H.F., V.H.F., Marine Band Radio and Tetra. These systems are operated from our specialised Operational Support Unit.

Emergency Response

Training centres are located at Stradbally, Durrow and Mountmellick. If you are interested in the above and are aged between 18-65, contact us to find out more on (057) 8664106, e-mail lpaston@laoiscoco.ie or visit our website at www.laoiscivildefence.ie

Economic Development, Enterprise and Planning

Director of Services: Anna Marie Delaney

Chairperson: John Moran, M.C.C.

Members

Sectoral

John Joe Fennelly, M.C.C.	Harry Vanston (Farming Sector)
Mary Sweeney, M.C.C.	Pat Culleton, (Development/ Construction)
David Goodwin, M.C.C.	Michael Kielty, I.C.T.U. (Trade Union)
Aidan Mullins, M.C.C.	William Telford (Business/Commercial)
	Noel Gavigan (Environment/ Conservation)

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Laois County Council continues on an ongoing basis to promote the economic development of county Laois. Actions undertaken in support of the economic development of the County are compatible with the objectives of the County Development Plan 2011-2017.

The preparation of the Local Economic and Community Plan commenced in 2014. The Socio Economic Statement was agreed by the SPC and Local Community and Development Committee (LCDC) in December 2015 following a lengthy consultation phase with approximately 150 engaging in the process. Many of those who participated were community leaders or agency representatives involved in economic and community development. The workshops focused on the Draft Socio-Economic Statement and in particular on the High-Level Goals. 19 written submissions were received and the Plan will be completed in 2016.

Other actions taken by the Council in supporting businesses were

- Payment of four shopfront grants
- Production of a promotional video clip by Connect Ireland in partnership with Laois County Council
- Support to Trade Expo'S held in the County
- Continued support to the Portlaoise and Portarlinton Enterprise Centres
- Progressing an Improvement Plan for Clonminham Business Park

LOCAL ENTERPRISE OFFICE LAOIS

The Local Enterprise Office acts as a "First Stop Shop" for anyone seeking information and support on starting or growing a business in Ireland. Our role, as LEO Laois, is to drive the development of local enterprise, putting local micro and small business at the heart of job creation. We support business start-ups and work to increase the job potential of new and existing micro and small businesses with information, advice, training, mentoring, seminars and selective financial support.

2015 was a very productive year for LEO Laois. €251,825 was approved in grant aid with the potential to create 33 full-time jobs and sustain a further 20. Over 600 enquiries were dealt with and 2015 saw an increase in participants on training courses, as well as a increase in demand for mentoring. All of these supports were promoted to, made available for, and tailored specifically towards the needs of small, micro and start-up businesses in Laois. Dedicated programmes were designed and run to support target groups such as the food and retail sector, women in business, etc.

REVIEW OF ACTIVITIES, OUTPUTS AND KEY INITIATIVES DURING 2015

Measure 1- Selective Financial Intervention – Grant Aid

LEO provides direct financial support to micro businesses (10 employees or less) in the form of Feasibility/Innovation Grants, Priming Grants and Business Expansion Grants.

- A Feasibility/Innovation Grant is designed to assist the promoter with researching market demand for a product or service and examining its sustainability.
- A Priming Grant is a business start-up grant available to micro enterprises within the first 18 months of start-up.
- A Business Expansion Grant is designed to assist the business in its growth phase after the initial 18 month start-up period.

The financial support approved for businesses in county Laois in 2015 is summarised as follows:

GRANTS BY TYPE, NUMBER & AMOUNT
APPROVED 2014

Grant Type	No. of Businesses	Amount €
Priming Grants	6	176,850
Business Expansion Grants	2	59,375
Feasibility/Innovation Grants	1	15,600
Total Approved	9	251,825

Measure 2 - Entrepreneurial and Capability
Development

This measure is designed to provide small businesses with the necessary skills and information to assist them in their development and growth. It also provides for actions that assist in the development of an entrepreneurial culture in the County. The actions include training programmes on a variety of business issues, mentoring and management development programmes, exhibitions, schools programmes, etc. The programmes delivered in 2015 were as follows:

Training Programmes

A total of 62 training courses were on offer through LEO in 2015 with a total of 562 persons participating. Of the persons trained during the year, a total of 200 (35%) were male and 362 (65%) female.

- **Starting Your Business**
LEO ran 8 Start Your Own Business courses with 80 participants in 2015 which provided vital information and training to those considering entering the field of entrepreneurship.
- **Growing Your Business:**
LEO continued to provide training to meet the needs of existing businesses. Training was delivered via half day or full day workshops

and included the following:

- Basic Book-Keeping & Taxation for Business
- The Potential of Twitter for Business
- SAGE Computerised Accounts
- How to write a Business Plan
- Marketing on a Shoestring
- How to motivate and manage people
- Maximising the potential of Facebook for Business
- The Potential of LinkedIn for Business
- Digital Marketing & Website Design
- How to Successfully Pitch for new Business
- How to get paid on time
- HACCP/Food Safety Programme
- Online Marketing & Social Media
- Marketing for the SMEs
- Health & Safety for the SME
- Email Marketing
- Entrepreneurship for Under 25s
- Retail Development Programme
- Occupational First Aid
- Tax, Cashflow, Pricing and Debt Collection
- Business Blogging
- How to keep a set of Accounts using Excel
- Branding & Packaging your business
- Developing business management skills for women
- Food Academy Programme
- Improve your sales negotiating skills
- Health & Safety for the SME
- Procurement Seminar

Female Entrepreneurship

LEO recognises that new business start-ups for all people are difficult and its programmes are tailored to be as flexible as possible. It acknowledges, however, that specific issues affect women in business and it addresses these by providing specific programmes for women in business.

• **Developing Business Management Skills for Women**

This programme was offered to women looking at starting their own business and those already in business and wishing to develop their management skills. A total of 10 participated on this programme

• Laois Enterprising Women's Network

LEO continued to facilitate the Laois Enterprising Women's Network with 6 network meetings held during the year.

Student Enterprise Awards

The Student Enterprise Awards is the biggest enterprise competition for students in Ireland. It helps students to grasp real life skills associated with running a business including working as part of a team, managing production and finances, organising a sales and marketing campaign and liaising directly with customers, judges and the media. LEO played an active part in promoting this initiative with 7 schools participating in the 2015 Programme, comprising over 290 students.

Enterprise Promotion Workshops

LEO played an active part in promoting enterprise amongst primary schools through the Enterprise Promotion Workshops. The aim of the workshops is to show how the very things you learn at school every day and your inherent abilities can make you a successful entrepreneur. 468 sixth class students from 20 primary schools took part in this programme giving students an insight into what it means to be enterprising.

Promotion

During the period LEO continued to carry out a range of promotional activities designed to promote enterprise within the county. LEO provided a range of information on the services and supports available to small businesses through the website, social media, local advertising and mailshots.

Mentoring

The Mentor Programme is designed to match up the knowledge, skills, insights and entrepreneurial capability of experienced business people with small business owner/managers who need practical and strategic one-to-one advice and guidance. 68 clients received one-to-one mentoring 2015.

Business Clinics

27 business clinics in the areas of Social Media, Business Planning and Marketing were held throughout the year with a total of 99 clients availing of free one-to-one business advice.

Micro Finance Ireland

Under a partnership between Microfinance Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices, business loans are available through the Local Enterprise Office. 7 businesses applied for funding under this programme in 2015, with 2 being approved. 7 MFI mentors were assigned.

Ireland's Best Young Entrepreneur

73 applications were received in Laois under this initiative, the 2nd highest in the country. 3 County Winners – Best Idea, Michael Casey (MAC Developments); Best Start Up, Noel Walsh (Walsh Agri) and Best Established, Stephen Dowling (Dunmasc Genetics), progressed to the Regional Finals in November.



Trading Online Vouchers

To support small businesses to enhance their online trading presence, Online Trading Vouchers to the value of €2,500 (up to a maximum of 50% of the total cost) are available to Laois Businesses through a programme under the Government's National Digital Strategy and delivered through the Local Enterprise Offices. Under this initiative 32 applications were received as follows:

- 7 refusals
- 25 approvals to the value of €45,580 with the potential to create an additional 35 full time and 34 part time jobs
- 43 business attended information sessions

Exhibitions

LEO exhibited at the following events during the year:

- National Ploughing Championships, 22nd to 24th September, 2015. 16 LEO clients exhib

ited in the Laois Open for Business Arena; 2 LEO clients exhibited in the Local Enterprise Village.

- Mountrath Business Expo in conjunction with Bank of Ireland

Business Development Support Grants

LEO may make financial assistance available to qualifying clients towards the following:

- Technical Training
- Purchase of Software
- Quality Assurance Certification
- Trade Fairs
- E-Business

23 Business Development Support Grants were approved in 2015 as follows:

GRANT TYPE	NO. OF BUSINESSES	AMOUNT €
Trade Fair grants	12	15,794
Website Design Grants	8	9,160
Marketing Grants	1	692
Technical Training	2	737
TOTAL	23	26,383

Performance Indicators 2014

Economic Development

The no. of jobs created with assistance from the Local Enterprise Office	33
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Planning Department

The overall objective of the Planning Department is to implement the provisions of the Planning Acts and provide appropriate support measures in order to promote the physical, social and economical well being of the county so that living standards are protected and raised, and work opportunities fostered and created, having regard to the principles of sustainability.

The Planning Department can be broken down into 5 separate areas:

- (i) Development Management
- (ii) Forward Planning
- (iii) Planning Enforcement
- (iv) Building Control
- (v) Unfinished Housing Estates

(i) Development Management

The number of planning applications received in 2015 was 563. However, it should be noted that 120 of the total applications received were invalid and required the applicant to submit a new application. The main reasons for invalidation of planning files were public notices being out of date, or not erected on site, previous permissions expired, agents name omitted from maps/drawings, no north point shown on maps and distances not shown on site layouts.

The following table gives a breakdown of valid planning applications received and decisions made during 2015:

- Number of valid applications received: 444
- Number of decisions made: 391
- Number of applications granted: 367
- Number of applications refused: 24

2015 Performance

- Invalid applications returned to applicant: 21.3%
- Referrals to Area Offices (working days): 14
- 12 applications were appealed to An Bord Pleanála in 2015.

Customer Service Initiatives

2015 saw the continuation of the scanning of planning applications as they are received by the Planning Authority. Throughout 2015, the public were able to access all planning applications on-line within two weeks of the Planning Authority receiving them.

374 pre-planning meetings were held in 2015, at which members of the public had an opportunity to discuss planning matters with a planner prior to submitting a planning application. The Planners also facilitated the public by holding a number of pre-planning meetings on site.

64 Section 5 Certificates were issued by Laois County Council in 2015.

The Planning website continues to be a very popular attraction with 20,885 hits last year.

(ii) Forward Planning

Forward Planning plays a pivotal role in the physical, economic and social development of County Laois. The Laois County Development Plan 2011-2017, provides the strategic framework and policy context within which the Local Authority makes its planning decisions. A review of the County Development Plan commenced on the 9th October 2015, with public consultation meetings being held in Portlaoise, Portllington, Rathdowney and Killeslin at which approximately 120 people attended. The review is a two year process which will conclude in 2017.

Conservation

A total of 5 no. Section 57 Declarations in relation to works to Protected Structures at various locations throughout County Laois were processed in 2015.

Grant aid for Protected Structures

A limited "Structures at Risk" fund from the Department Arts Heritage and Local Government in 2015 allowed funding of urgent conservation works at two privately owned protected structures in Laois. A scheme of funding for 2016 has been announced and allocation of funds to owners of protected structures will be announced in mid-January. These schemes are managed by the Heritage Office.

Part 8 Development

Part 8 consent for the upgrade of various road junctions in Portlaoise was granted during 2015.

Dereliction

The Council continued to implement its powers under the Derelict Sites Act 1990 by targeting those properties that are on the Derelict Sites Register. Working with the owners of those properties, the outstanding issues are being dealt with and those

properties that are no longer deemed 'derelict' are removed from the Derelict Sites Register.

Definition of a Derelict Site

The Derelict Sites ACT, 1990 defines a Derelict Site as;

"Any land which detracts, or is likely to detract, to a material degree from the amenity, character or appearance of land in the neighbourhood of the land in question because of-

- a) the existence on the land in question of structures which are in a ruinous, derelict or dangerous condition, or
 - b) the neglected, unsightly or objectionable condition of the land or any structures on the land in question, or
 - c) the presence, deposit or collection on the land in question of any litter, rubbish, debris or waste, except where the presence, deposit or collection of such litter, rubbish, debris or waste results from the exercise of a right conferred by statute or by common law
- Total Number of Files opened for 2015: 26
 - Total Number of Files closed as a result of dereliction being addressed in 2015: 15
 - Total Number of Files: 116

(iii) Planning Enforcement

The Planning Authority, in accordance with the statutory requirements under the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2013 as amended, seeks to ensure compliance with planning permissions and also to prevent unauthorised development.

Work continued in 2015 by the Enforcement team to ensure that any breaches of planning law were investigated and followed up. In 2015, Council staff attended Court on 29 occasions in respect of enforcement prosecutions and while some cases are still ongoing, 10 cases have been successfully resolved during 2015.

The Planning Authority served 15 enforcement notices, 70 warning letters and investigated 101 complaints all of which highlight the active pursuit of planning non-compliance and unauthorised development by our Enforcement Section.

Licensing of Outdoor Events

An outdoor event is defined as a public performance which takes place wholly or mainly in the open air or in a structure with no roof or a partial,

temporary or retractable roof, a tent or similar temporary structure and which consists of music, dancing, displays of public entertainment or any activity of a like kind. The organisers of such events are required to obtain a licence from the Planning Authority where the audience comprises of 5,000 or more people.

One such outdoor event is the "Electric Picnic" which has been held in Stradbally yearly since 2004.

(iv) Building Control

The Building Control Section deal with all Commencement Notices received, and carries out inspections on the buildings to ensure they comply with the various Building Control regulations.

- Number of valid commencement notices received: 100
- Number of commencement notices for Change of Use /Alterations/Renovations/ Extensions = 21
- Number of Commercial Building Notices = 14 (No of commercial buildings covered = 17)
- Number of Dwellings covered by valid commencement notices: = 107 (of which 58 no. are "one off" dwellings)
- Number of buildings inspected: 20
- Number of buildings inspected as a % of buildings covered by valid Commencement notices: 13.8%

(v) Unfinished Housing Estates

Laois County Council is responsible for the taking in charge of estates. In 2015 10 estates were taken in charge which are listed below. Traditionally this occurred when a request was received from the developer of the estate and/or the owners of the houses within the estate. However, in recent years, where the developer has failed to complete the estate, Laois County Council has intervened to complete the estate and this work, where possible, is funded from the bond. This policy of actively pursuing the developer and bond holder will continue in 2016.

The following estates were taken in charge in 2015:

1. Ballacollig, Mountmellick
2. Aughnaharna Drive
3. Miners Walk, Crettyard
4. Clarney Hall, Rathdowney
5. Crann Nua, Portarlinton
6. Rochfort Manor

7. Rockview, Portlaoise



8. Ashton Manor

9. Monaclear,

10. Heywood Village

The Planning Department endeavour to liaise with the residents of unfinished estates to keep them fully informed of progress in relation to their estates.

Performance Indicators 2014

New buildings inspected

New Buildings inspected as a percentage of new buildings notified to the local authority 15.79%

No./% of planning decisions confirmed by An Bord Pleanála

No. of local authority planning decisions which were the subject of an appeal to An Bord Pleanála that were determined by the Board on any date in the last year. 7

% of the determinations at A

which were to confirm either with or without variation the decision made by the local authority 85.71%

Performance of Enforcement

Total no. of planning cases (as opposed to complaints) referred to or initiated by the local authority that were investigated 101

Total no. of planning cases being investigated 218

Total no of cases that were closed 98

% of the cases closed that were dismissed under Section 52(2), Planning and Development Act 2000 6.12%

% of the cases closed that were resolved to the local authority's satisfaction through negotiations 2.04%

% of the cases closed that were closed due to enforcement proceedings 37.76%

Cost per capita of the planning service

The Annual Financial Statement (AFS) programme D data divided by the population of the local authority area per the 2011 census €21.25

Head of Finance: Gerry Murphy

Financial/Management Accountant: Julie Bergin

The Finance Department is responsible for the following services:

Motor Taxation, Accounts Payable, Revenue Collection(Rates, Water, Fire charges, Development Contributions), NPPR, Internal Audit, Preparation of Annual Budgets and Financial Statements, Financial Management and all ancillary matters

Commercial Rates

The General Annual Rate on Valuation was €64.63.

Water and Waste Water Charges

In 2015, the total number of commercial users was 2,970 of which 2,841 were metered. The charge for metered water in 2015 was €0.96 per 1,000 litres and €1.45 per 1,000 litres for waste water. A fixed charge applied to the remaining 129 customers. In addition, there was a standing meter rental charge of €60 per annum.

The Water Services Act 2013 provided for the establishment of Irish Water as an independent subsidiary within Ervia. The Local Authority now acts as an Agent for Irish Water for commercial water charges.

Prompt Payment of Accounts

The Council complies with the terms of the Prompt Payments Act as amended by the European Communities (Late Payment in Commercial Transactions) Regulations.

Total number of late payments in excess of €250: Nil

Performance Indicators 2014

5 year summary of revenue account balance

2010	€-519,500
2011	€-499,962
2012	€-494,535
2013	€-493,027
2014	€-393,286

5 year summary of % collection levels for major revenue sources

The individual % figures for each of (a) Rates, (b) Rent & Annuities and (c) Housing Loans 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014

	2010,	2011,	2012,	2013,	2014
Rates	81%	77%	74%	70%	69%
Rent & Annuities	93%	94%	94%	94%	95%
Housing Loans	86%	81%	76%	67%	62%

MyPay Update

The project is currently running on schedule and within budget. There are currently 55 employees based in the shared services centre. Waves 1, 2, 3 and 4 have been completed on schedule with Laois, Offaly, Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath, Leitrim, Galway, Carlow, Monaghan, Cavan, Kildare, Meath, Kilkenny, Louth, South Dublin, Tipperary, Kerry and Wicklow County Councils along with Limerick and Waterford County and City Councils and the LGMA now live.

The following are the statistics on the project up to the end of December:

Value of Payments	€359.6m
Number of Payments	448,495
Number of Pay Groups Paid	1865
Number of Payroll Runs	825

An initial Wave 5 meeting, attended by representatives from Mayo, Sligo and Donegal County Councils and Galway and Cork City Councils was held on 10th December 2015. The implementation in Mayo is expected to be live in late February 2016. Work is well underway to bring the other wave 5 sites on board by the end of June 2016.

The Superannuation element of the project has commenced and the "as is" process mapping has been completed. Workshops have been held in a number of Local Authorities on the "to be" process mapping and data requirements. A pilot of the service commenced in Laois County Council in November 2015. Carlow County Council and the LGMA will join the pilot in early 2016. Pending a successful pilot the service will be rolled out to the other local authorities on a wave basis similar to payroll.

Motor Taxation

Through the National Vehicle Driver File (NVDF) System, this Section continues to cater for all motor taxation transactions for the County which is widely availed of by the public both at the counter, by postal services and also via online. The online transactions continues to increase year on year and now represents 47% of the overall business conducted in Motor Tax. The total transactions carried out by Laois Motor Taxation Office in 2015 was 53,910.

CO2 Rates

Motor Tax for vehicles registered after the 1 July 2008 is determined on the basis of CO2 bands or cubic capacity of engine, whichever is less. Taxes range from €120 a year for the greenest cars to €2,350 for cars with the highest emissions ratings. Motor tax rates are graduated as one moves up the CO2 emissions.

Vehicle Licences

The total receipts for 2015 was €9,425,695 compared to €10,456,834 in 2014. The number of vehicle licences (discs) issued in 2015 was 43,940 compared to 46,749 in 2014.

Since 1st October 2013, the existing arrangements whereby a person made an off-the-road declaration in the Garda Station ceased. In the future if a vehicle is not going to be used in a public place, a declaration must be made in advance of the vehicle being taken off the road and while the vehicle is still in tax. A vehicle can be declared off the road for a period not less than 3 months and not greater than 12 months. In 2015, 1,389 SORD applications were processed during the year.

Revised Vehicle Testing Procedures

Since September 2013, the function of issuing Certificates of Roadworthiness for commercial/goods vehicles was taken over by the commercial vehicle test centres. Customers will receive a pass statement at the garage and a new style CRW by post. The NDVF system is automatically updated with CRW details.

Revised Vehicle Registration Procedures

The Revenue Commissioners have appointed the National Car Testing Services (NCTS) to carry out vehicle registration functions on their behalf. They can be contacted at 1890 927 787 or on line at

www.nct.ie/vrt.

NCT (National Car Test)

Testing of private vehicles is ongoing since January 2000. The Laois Centre is located at Lismard Business Centre, Timahoe Road, Portlaoise. Initial test is after 4 years and then every 2 years thereafter. Vintage cars are the only vehicle exempt from this test.

Performance indicators at 31st December 2014

% of Motor Tax Transactions conducted online

The percentage of motor tax transactions which are dealt with online (i.e transaction is processed and the tax disc is issued)	42.74%
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Performance Indicators at 31st December 2015

% of Motor Tax transactions which:

Are dealt with over the counter:

49.46% (48,594) of Laois MTO Transactions

Are dealt with by post:

3.64% (3,568) of Laois MTO Transactions

Are dealt with on-line:

46.90% (46,085) Represents 47% of all tax applications.

Average number of Public Opening hours per week
28.7 hours

Number of Vehicle Licence Postal Applications -% of overall postal applications which were dealt with:

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------|----------------|
| a) | on the same day | 98.82% (3,526) |
| b) | on the 2nd or 3rd day | 0.56% (20) |
| c) | on the 4th or 5th day | - |
| d) | over 5 days | 0.62% (22) |

Revenue Collection

		31.12.2015	31.12.2014
Housing Loans			
a)	Amount collected at year end as a percentage of amount due	64%	62%
b)	Percentage of arrears:		
	(i) Less than 1 mth	1%	0.65%
	(ii) 1-2 Mths	1%	1.58%
	(iii) 2 – 3 months old	1%	1.68%
	(iv) more than 3 months old	97%	96.08%
Rents			
a)	Amount collected at year end as a percentage of amounts due	96%	95%
b)	Percentage of arrears		
	(i) Less than four weeks	10%	11.5%
	(ii) 4-6 weeks	11%	11.0%
	(iii) 6-12 weeks	16%	14.9%
	(iv) greater than 12 weeks	63%	62.6%
Commercial Rates			
	Amount collected at year end as a percentage of amount due	75%	69%

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Annual Financial Statement 2015

Revenue Account	Gross Expenditure 2015 €	Income 2015 €	Net Expenditure 2015 €
Programme Group			
Housing & Building	10,752,694	12,394,165	(1,641,471)
Road Transportation & Safety	13,158,809	8,853,445	4,305,364
Water & Sewerage	4,694,592	4,636,089	58,503
Development Incentives & Controls	4,703,682	1,919,565	2,784,117
Environmental Protection	6,704,704	1,830,717	4,873,987
Recreation & Amenity	3,782,086	840,461	2,941,625
Agriculture, Education, Health & Welfare	1,148,649	656,430	492,219
Miscellaneous	8,786,488	4,641,462	4,145,026
Total Expenditure/Income	53,731,704	35,772,333	

Net cost of programmes to be funded from Rates & Local Government Fund	17,959,371
Rates	12,513,139
Pension Levy	967,698
Local Government Fund - General Purpose Grant	7,631,324
Surplus for Year before Transfers	3,152,791
Transfers from/(to) Reserves	(3,057,368)
Overall Surplus for Year	95,423
General Reserve @ 1st January 2014	(393,286)
General Reserve @ 31st December 2015	(297,863)

Capital Account

Balance @ 01.01.2015	(3,780,969)
Grants	8,975,811
Other Income	3,280,636
Transfer from/to Revenue	3,057,368
Expenditure	(16,238,762)
Balance @ 31.12.2015	(4,705,916)

Social Club

2015 was another very successful year for the Social Club which currently has a membership of 290. Numerous events were held in 2015.

Monthly Draw

On the first Friday of every month a draw takes place for Social Club members.

Summer Barbecue

A Barbecue was held on 18th June in County Hall with 70 people attending.

October Social Evening

A fancy dress Halloween Party was held in the Square Bar on Friday 30th October.

Annual Mass

The Annual Mass for deceased members and staff of Laois County Council took place in the Council Chamber. Invitations were issued to all retired and current staff members of the Council. The Mass was very well attended and refreshments were provided in the canteen afterwards.

Members Kiddies Christmas Party

The Social Club Members Kiddies Party was held this year in the Heritage Hotel on Sunday 6th December. It was a great success. The kiddies were entertained by Santa (aka Cllr. John King), his Elf and Jecca the Clown and Lesley the facepainter.

Annual Christmas Party

The party was held on Friday the 11th December in the Heritage Hotel. 120 staff attended and a great night was had.

Retired Members

A sub-Committee has been formed consisting of John Daly, Sean Mullins and Roisin Walsh to encourage all retired staff who are members of the Social Club to participate in Social Club events. They also hope to organise events independently of the Social Club to include non-members and want to encourage all retired staff to get together on a regular basis.

Other Events

Some of the other events held were: Samaritans Easter Egg draw, Grand National Draw, Easter Egg Surprise, Subsidised Packages to Dublin Zoo, National Stud/Japanese Gardens, Fota Island and Tayto Park, Subsidised Tickets for National Ploughing Championship and Bloom 2015, subsidised tickets for "Weighing In" and "Facing the Music" in the Dunamase Theatre, subsidised Moonriver Cruise, a trip to Oakwood Theme Park in Wales and a trip to Newbridge Greyhound Racing and the End of Year Draw

Golf Society

Cathal Farrell captained the Golf Society in 2015 and his Captain's Prize was held in Portlaoise Golf Club. There was a good turn out on the day and his prize was won by Fint Scully. The Kennedy Cup was played this year in conjunction with the Pang Trophy in Portarlinton Golf Club and was won by Fint Scully. The Pang Trophy was won by Pat Farrell, Declan Carroll, Martin Parkinson and Gerry Maher. The golfer of the year competition was won by Michael Drennan. Declan Carroll is the incoming Captain for 2016.

We are always looking for new members - enquires to Declan Carroll, Eddie Kelly, Joan Dowling, Pat Malone or Larry Gittens.

APPENDIX I

TITLE, PURPOSE AND NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF EACH COMMITTEE AND JOINT COMMITTEE AND THE NUMBER OF MEETINGS OF EACH COMMITTEE, JOINT COMMITTEE AND JOINT POLICING COMMITTEE HELD DURING 2015

COMMITTEES

Name of Committee	Members Elected	Number of Meetings
Local Community Development Committee	Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Jerry Lodge Councillor John King	9
Joint Policing Committee	Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Seamus McDonald Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor John Moran Councillor John King Councillor Tom Mulhall Councillor David Goodwin Councillor William Aird Councillor James Kelly Councillor Noel Tuohy Councillor Caroline Dwane Stanley	4
Heritage Forum	Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor William Aird	3
Placenames Committee	Councillor Jerry Lodge Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor William Aird Councillor Mary Sweeney Councillor James Kelly	None
Audit Committee	Councillor John Moran Councillor Jerry Lodge	5
Laois School of Music	Councillor Mary Sweeney	1
Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee	Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Mary Sweeney Councillor Tom Mulhall Councillor John King Councillor Jerry Lodge Councillor Paddy Bracken	1
Kyletalesha Monitoring Committee	Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Seamus McDonald Councillor William Aird	3
Rural Water Monitoring Committee	Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor Tom Mulhall	2

Decade of Commemorations Committee

Councillor Noel Tuohy
 Councillor Aidan Mullins
 Councillor John Joe Fennelly
 Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald
 Councillor Pdraig Fleming
 Councillor John King
 Councillor James Kelly

9

OUTSIDE BODIES**Name of Committee****Members Elected**

Association of Irish Local Government

Councillor John Joe Fennelly
 Councillor Paschal McEvoy
 Councillor David Goodwin

Laois & Offaly Education & Training Board

Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald
 Councillor Jerry Lodge
 Councillor Paschal McEvoy
 Councillor Mary Sweeney
 Councillor John King
 Councillor Caroline Dwane Stanley

Laois Tourism Company Ltd

Councillor John Moran

AGM of Irish Public Bodies Mutual Insurances Ltd

Councillor Jerry Lodge

Laois Arts Theatre Company Ltd

Councillor Paschal McEvoy
 Councillor Jerry Lodge
 Councillor Mary Sweeney

Board of Abbeyleix Heritage Trust

Councillor John Joe Fennelly

Local Authority Members Association

Councillor Seamus McDonald

Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly

Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald
 Councillor Paddy Bracken

Laois Partnership Company Ltd

Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald
 Councillor Aidan Mullins
 Councillor William Aird

Laois Transport for Rural Integration Programme

Councillor Seamus McDonald

Portarlington Leisure Centre

Councillor Paschal McEvoy
 Councillor Pdraig Fleming
 Councillor Tom Mulhall

Portlaoise Leisure Centre

Councillor Jerry Lodge
 Councillor William Aird
 Councillor Noel Tuohy

Portlaoise Enterprise Centre

Councillor Jerry Lodge
 Councillor William Aird
 Councillor Mary Sweeney

Portarlington Enterprise Centre

Councillor Paschal McEvoy
 Councillor Tom Mulhall

Midlands Energy Agency

Councillor John Joe Fennelly

Board of Treo Nua Ltd	Councillor Noel Tuohy
Dublin Mid-Leinster Regional Forum	Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor William Aird Councillor John King
Laois Advocacy Against Domestic Abuse Limited	Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald
Midland Regional Drugs Task Force	Councillor Paschal McEvoy
LABEL	Councillor Jerry Lodge

PAYMENTS TO MEMBERS 2015

Annual Allowance (monthly exp)	€ 86,129.48
Conference and Training (incl fees)	€ 57,215.20
Mobile Phone Recoupments	€ 968.23
Representational Allowance	€311,780.50
Strategic Policy Committee Chairs	€ 24,000.00
Cathaoirleach's Allowance (12 months)	€ 19,811.92
Vice-Cathaoirleach's Allowance (12 months)	€ 3,962.35
Municipal District Chairs	€ 17,782.77
Salaries	€521,650.45

PAYMENTS TO MEMBERS 2015

Annual Allowance (monthly exp)	€ 86,129.48
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Municipal District Chairs	€ 17,782.77
Salaries	€521,650.45

APPENDIX 111

The following are details of the conferences and training events attended by Members of Laois County Council in 2015

Conference	Venue	Date	Delegates	Expend.
Colmcille Heritage Trust	Gartan	27-28 February	7	€4,353.70
EU Support Programme for Irish Regions	Carlingford	27th Feb to 1st Mar	1	€ 525.19
Water, Sewerage & Waste	Dublin	16th April	1	€ 122.68
Environmental Courts, Enforcement	Cork	19th June	1	€ 234.45
Local & Economic Community Plans	Clonakilty	10-12 July	1	€ 541.34
Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015	Clonakilty	7-9 August	1	€ 613.62
Changes to Community Development	Galway	31st July to 1st Aug	1	€ 158.66
A Practical Guide to Budget 2016	Clonakilty	23-25 October	1	€ 317.55
James Fintan Lalor 2015	Portlaoise	31st Jan to 1st Feb	1	€ 34.82
Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015	Carlingford	20-22 November	3	€1,553.27
Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015	Galway	27-28 November	3	€1,130.25
Urban Regeneration & Housing Act	Galway	20-21 November	2	€ 640.31
The Town Renewal Plan	Galway	11-12 December	2	€ 660.43

Overall Total: €10,886.27

Training	Venue	Date	Delegates	Expend
AILG				
AILG Governance	Arklow	21st February	10	€2,163.68
AILG 2nd Annual Conference	Carrickmacross	12-13 March	10	€4,196.16
AILG – Module 2	Celbridge	14th April	7	€1,099.20
AILG – Module 3	Portlaoise	21st May	6	€ 525.06
AILG – Module 4	Longford	13th June	8	€1,682.71
AILG – Module 4	Roscommon	25th June	3	€ 328.49
AILG Autumn 2015	Clonakilty	1-2 October	12	€5,899.26
AILG – Module 5	Tullamore	6th October	1	€ 90.17
AILG – Module 6	Dublin	14th November	6	€1,519.83
	Ennis	10th November	1	
	Galway	5th November	1	

LAMA

LAMA Spring Training	Tuam	10-11 April	9	€4,166.32
LAMA Autumn Training	Kilkenny	9-10 October	4	€1,240.32

Irish Private & Public Bodies Consulting Ltd.

Governments Construction 2020	Wexford	7-8 February	6	€2,755.43
The Councillor & Irish Water Reserved & Executive Functions	Letterkenny	6-8 March	7	€5,068.00
The Councillors Development Plan	Wexford	8-10 May	7	€2,778.06
Planning & Development Bill 2014	Wexford	26-28 June	5	€2,160.61
Government Re-think?	Letterkenny	7-9 August	3	€2,101.74
Building & Control (Amendment)	Wexford	11-13 Sept.	2	€ 965.94
Local Authority Budgets 2016	Letterkenny	23-25 October	8	€5,007.42
IPBMI AGM	Wexford	20-22 Nov.	7	€2,469.48
	Dublin	01 May	1	€ 111.05

Overall Total: €46,328.93

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Civil Defence HQ, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664106
Environment, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674318
Higher Education Grants, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664137
Housing, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664110
Human Resources, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664219
Landfill Site, Kyletalesha, Portlaoise	Tel: (057) 8620653
Library Headquarters, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664041
Motor Tax Office, Block 2, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674385
Planning, Block 1, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664032
Register of Electors, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664105
Roads, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674352
Sports & Leisure, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674363
Water Services, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674355