

Comhairle Chontae Laoise



Laois County Council



County Manager's Report

Budget Year Ending 31st December 2007

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL

Áras an Chontae,
Portlaoise,
Co. Laois.
11th December 2006

Don Cathaoirleach agus gach Ball den Chomhairle

**Re: Draft Budget of Income and Expenditure for the year
ending 31st December 2007**

Introduction

I enclose for your consideration and adoption the draft Budget for the year ending 31st December 2007.

The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government by Circular Fin 14/2006, dated 11/9/2006 has determined the period 25th November 2006 to 13th January 2007 as the prescribed period for County Councils to hold their 2007 budget meetings.

At the October meeting of the Council it was agreed to hold the statutory budget meeting on Monday 18th December 2006. The process of considering, adopting the budget and determining the rate on valuation must be completed within a period of 21 days beginning on this date. In effect the process must be completed by 7th January 2007. The Corporate Policy Group was consulted and advised of the assumptions made in relation to the budget preparation.

The budget is framed against a background of increasing costs relating, in particular, to payroll ('Towards 2016 General Pay Agreement'), energy and waste water treatment costs. It has, also, been prepared against the background that price inflation is expected to come in at approximately 4.1% in 2007.

'Towards 2016' presents an opportunity for local authorities to make further improvements in organisational efficiencies. It is intended to engage with the Trade Unions through the Partnership at Work process to develop this further.

Review of the County Development Plan 2006-2012

The process for reviewing and adopting the County Development Plan was completed in 2006. Part of the plan is being varied by Ministerial directive and this process is currently underway. In addition, the Portlaoise Local Area Plan was prepared, published and is listed for final adoption at the Council Meeting on 11th December 2006.

The Mountmellick Draft Local Area Plan was published and the County Managers Report on submissions will be considered at the January meeting of the Council. It is proposed to publish the Draft Local Area Plans for Portarlinton and Graiguecullen in January 2007.

There is an ongoing programme for the preparation of twenty-five (25) Village Plans. The first of these, Killenard, will go on public display on the 14th December 2006.

Waste Management Plan for the Midland Region

A replacement Waste Management Plan for the Midland region was made on the 1st February 2006.

The challenges for the local authorities, the waste industry and society at large are quite onerous and the plan presents an ambitious waste prevention, minimisation, recycling and recovery vision for the future.

Remediation Works at Kyletalesha Landfill

Work on a 3 million euro remediation contract is almost complete at Kyletalesha landfill. The contract included the capping of all of the filled cells and the installation of a gas collection and flaring system.

County Development Board

The Laois County Development Board continued its work of promoting the development of the County economically, socially and culturally in 2006.

Highlights of the year included:

- the development of new Task Groups on Transport, Sustainability, Older Persons and Quality of Life,
- the completion of a local Anti-Poverty Strategy,
- the development of an Inter Agency Strategy for Travellers,
- Work with agencies to develop a new unified structure for local and rural development companies in Laois,
- Comhairle na nÓg and Paisti na nÓg meetings with over 400 students participating,
- The completion of a Disability Access Audit of Laois County Council buildings and working areas,
- the provision of ongoing support for the County Community Forum to enhance its participative role within the county and
- the distribution of smoke alarms to older persons nominated by the Laois County Council Community Forum

The Board continues its work of developing a more cohesive approach among all its stakeholders in regard to a broad range of areas of service

M7 Portlaoise to Castletown/M8 Portlaoise to Cullahill Motorway Scheme.

The motorway scheme covers the proposed routes of the M7 and M8 from the termination of M7 Portlaoise By-pass to beyond Borris In Ossory on the existing N7 and beyond Cullahill on the existing N8.

Ongoing contractual works in respect of site investigation, topographical surveys and archaeological works are nearing completion. The acquisition of land continues.

Two contractors have been selected to tender and they have until May 2007 to submit their best and final offer (BAFO). The successful contractor will be appointed by June 2007 and work on site will commence immediately.

N7 Castletown to Nenagh Scheme

This scheme consists of 36 kilometres of dual carriageway and includes bridges, junctions, a link road and ancillary works. An Bord Pleanála confirmed the compulsory purchase order in November 2005 and approved the proposed road development subject to minor modifications.

Five major contractors have been short listed to tender. In the meantime advance contract works, such as fencing and hedge clearance are proceeding. A contractor will be on site at the end of 2007. The estimated cost of the scheme is €300m.

Portlaoise Orbital Routes

The Council has been successful in delivering key sections of the orbital route and this will continue in 2007. The route from the Ballyfin road to the Mountmellick road was opened in November. Funds have been sought from the N.R.A. to complete the permanent tie-in to the N80.

Work has commenced on the Western Circular Route (Clonminam Link) and the Southern Circular Route (Kylekiproe) and both routes are due for completion in 2007.

Portlaoise Interchange

The development of a 250-acre site at the Portlaoise Interchange (Togher) seeks to exploit the economic development potential of the key transport corridor, which runs through the County. This interchange will deliver the national spatial strategy that positions Laois and Portlaoise as a transport node and inland port.

Six planning permissions have been granted to date on the site. These include a Train Care Depot, Enterprise Park and retail warehousing. Other decisions including the construction of a distributor road, a motorway services building, a petrol filling station and ancillary services are awaited. Work has already commenced on the Enterprise Park and Train Care Depot.

Enterprise Centres / Industrial Sites

The Portarlington Enterprise Company Ltd provides 12 incubation units and 8 offices for start up businesses in Portarlington. The Council disposed of an adjoining site to the Company in 2006 and plans for an extension to the centre are being drawn up.

A 20,000 sq. ft. Enterprise Centre is currently under construction at Clonminam Business Park, Portlaoise and this centre will contain six incubator units and six offices. The Laois County Enterprise will be relocating to new offices at this Centre in early January.

A planning application is being processed at present for the erection of an Enterprise unit and 11 serviced sites at Durrow.

A design and services layout has been prepared for the 5.5 acres of land at the Clonminam Industrial Estate acquired by the Council for business opportunity sites. It is proposed to advance this project to Part V111 in early 2007 and to go to tender in the middle of 2007.

Playgrounds and Sports Facilities

Two new playgrounds were officially opened during 2006 in Mountrath and Abbeyleix. Under the Council's programme three additional facilities will be provided in 2007 in Clonaslee, Stradbally and Mountmellick. This will bring the total number of playgrounds in the County to eight, including the playground at Portlaoise swimming pool. This programme will be further expanded during the next few years.

The Council secured funding of €35,000 to provide a skate park at the Old Church, Church Avenue, Portlaoise. The skate park was opened in May 2006.

Towards the end of 2006 work began on the provision of an eight lane athletic track on the grounds of the new V.E.C. School off the Mountrath Road in Portlaoise. It is hoped to have this facility open in the new year.

Swimming Pools

Work commenced in 2006 on the construction of a new Swimming Pool and Leisure Centre in Portlaoise and on improvement works to Portarlington Swimming Pool. The estimated costs of these works amount to €14 million and when grant aid and local assistance is taken into account, there is a net deficit of €7 million to be financed from the disposal of assets, the development contribution scheme and the revenue budget. These projects will be funded over a number of years.

Ballinakill swimming pool enjoyed a bumper season this year. The committee carried out great improvement works to the facility in 2006 and it is appropriate to acknowledge the work being undertaken by this committee in Ballinakill.

Urban Renewal Project

The Council has an ambitious Urban Renewal project for the area adjacent to County Hall, involving a two deck car parking and a Civic Plaza. This project will provide 180 public car parking spaces in Portlaoise which was a priority of the Council. Work will commence in January 2007.

Fire Service

Work has commenced on the construction of a new Fire Station in Abbeyleix. The tender documents are being examined in respect of a new Fire Station in Portarlington. The provision of a new fire station in Rathdowney has been approved by the DEHLG under their 2006 capital programme.

Portlaoise Main Drainage

Work commenced on the Network contract in May 2006. The works are progressing very well and the contract is ahead of programme. The scheme is scheduled for completion in the first quarter of 2008. The D.B.O. Waste Water Treatment Plant contract is expected to be awarded shortly. This contract has a two-year construction programme.

Laois Towns and Villages Sewerage Schemes

The Council's consultants will complete contract documents during the first half of 2006 for Network and Treatment Plant contracts in the towns of Abbeyleix, Clonaslee, Durrow, Mountrath, Rathdowney and Stradbally. Following receipt of DEHLG approval the contracts will be advertised.

Portarlington Water Supply Scheme

The well drilling contract commenced in June 2006 and is nearing completion. The main scheme will be advertised as soon as the Well Drilling contract has been completed and the results assessed.

Portlaoise/Mountmellick Water Supply Scheme

A contractor has been appointed for a Production Well Drilling Investigation to provide new sources for water supplies to Portlaoise and Mountmellick.

Mountmellick Sewerage Extension

The DEHLG has recently given the Council approval to draw up contract documents for this scheme. The works will involve improvements to the existing sewerage network and to the treatment plant.

Energy Agency

Laois County Council plans to establish an energy agency in partnership with other Local Authorities from the Midlands region. The agency will provide advice, information and support for the development of renewable and sustainable sources of energy for the county.

Pride of Place

Pride of Place is an all-Ireland competition, organised by Co-Operation Ireland, in association with Local Authorities, north and south of the border. The aim of Pride of Place is to work in partnership with communities and to encourage best practice, innovation and leadership in providing vibrant sustainable communities that improve the quality of life for all.

Following a countywide competition in early 2006, community groups in Durrow and Stradbally were honoured with first prize at a major national awards ceremony in October, for their work towards promoting social inclusion and "Pride of Place" in their areas.

In addition to wins for Durrow and Stradbally, both Clonaslee Tidy Towns and Ballacolla Tidy Towns were short listed for an award in their respective population categories. Abbeyleix Community Development Group represented Laois in the very competitive Category 4 (population 2,000 to 10,000 people).

Health and Safety

Health and Safety is a key issue for the Council and a full time officer commenced employment in December 2005. The Council is reviewing all its safety statements and work practices at present. The overall objective is to foster and promote a health and safety culture within the organisation. The requirements of the Health and Safety Act 2005 will require additional financial resources over the coming years.

Social Inclusion

Laois County Development Board will be working to implement its Anti Poverty Strategy and to support the work of the Social Inclusion Measures Working Group. The Council is developing a proactive approach to social inclusion in all areas of activity.

Disability

The Council will be complying with the requirements of the Disability Act 2005 in all areas of its activities. A programme of works to facilitate the disabled has commenced and will be implemented over a number of years

Tourism Strategy

Portlaoise will host the World Fleadh Irish and Celtic Music Festival in August 2007. This is a significant achievement for the town and Laois County Council played a major part in ensuring the festival came to the County.

The Council is, also, playing a leading role in other key tourism projects such as the Garden Festival in Emo Court, the Budweiser Golf Challenge in Killenard, the Gordon Bennett Rally and various developments in the Slieve Blooms.

Water Pricing Policy

The governing principle behind the Water Pricing Policy is Article 9 of the Water Framework Directive. This article obliges governments to ensure pricing regimes take account of the principle of full cost recovery for water services.

The Government's water services pricing policy framework further implements the 'polluter pays principle' and places a legal requirement on all local authorities to charge the full economic costs for water and waste water to all non domestic consumers. As part of this policy the required metering programme will be completed in Laois by the end of March 2007.

There will be no increase in water charges in 2007. However, it is proposed to introduce a waste water charge of €0.50 per 1000 litres from the 1st January in accordance with the water pricing policy and this charge will apply to all non-domestic users that have a connection to a public sewerage scheme.

Commercial Rates

Economic activity has increased considerably over the last 5 years. The net effective valuation of the County has increased from €105,584 in 2002 to €141,519 in 2007.

Having regard to the need to respond to the growth the County is experiencing I have provided a 3% increase in the general annual rate on valuation. This will bring the rate from €60.3222 to €62.14. This is less than the rate of inflation. I feel it is reasonable and necessary in the context of the nature and extent of growth in the County.

Local Government Fund

I have not received details of the Local Government fund to date. However, I am including an amount of €17,968,000 in the budget in respect of the Local Government Fund. This represents an increase of 6% on the amount received in 2006.

Conclusion

In preparing the budget for 2007 every effort has been made to maintain improvements in services while at the same time ensuring that increases for ratepayers and consumers were kept at a reasonable level. I am satisfied that the budget now before you achieves a fair balance in this regard and that the Council will be in a position to demonstrate progress in service delivery over the course of the coming year.

In addition to the revenue expenditure contained in this draft budget the Council has a significant capital programme that will impact positively on the economic, social and physical fabric of County Laois. A report (to issue under separate cover) will provide an overview of this indicative capital programme.

The draft budget provides for revenue spending of €67,553,000, an increase of €7,645,000 or 12.7% over that provided in 2006. The total estimated income is €40,000,000 leaving a net expenditure of €27,553,000. This will be financed from the Local Government Fund of €17,968,000, commercial rates of €8,794,000 and an amount of €791,000 transferred from capital.

The full detail of the budget provisions across each of the programme groups is set out in the statutory tables and the main highlights are summarised in the following pages.

While financial resources do not permit all of the wishes of the Members to be met at this time the budget will enable the Council to continue to provide a wide range of services to the public. The adoption of the budget is a reserved function of the Council. It is a key decision as it effectively sets the level of spending for the year ahead.

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Cathaoirleach and Members over the past 12 months and I look forward to working in partnership with you in 2007.

I wish to thank Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance and his staff who have undertaken the preparation of the budget. I would, also, like to record my appreciation to the Directors of Services and their staff, both indoor and outdoor, for their help and co-operation over the past 12 months.

I recommend the adoption of the draft budget as presented and the determination of the general annual rate on valuation of 62.14. I wish you well in your deliberations and every success in 2007.

Beannacht Libh
P Carey

Bainisteoir

PROGRAMME GROUP 1 – HOUSING & BUILDING.

Estimated Expenditure €11,011,000

Estimated Income €8,790,000

Maintenance, Repair and Improvement

An amount of 660,000 was included in the 2006 budget for the maintenance, repair and improvement of Council housing stock including Traveller accommodation sites, septic tank desludging and emergency repairs. Additional funding was approved by the Department of the Environment and Local Government (DEHLG) in June 2006 for septic tank replacement, the fitting of gas alarms, the provision of solid fuel cookers and phase 4 of the Planned Maintenance Programme.

An amount of €772,000 has been included for 2007.

Pre-let Repairs/Planned Maintenance

An amount of €300,000 was included in the 2006 budget for pre-letting repairs. In June 2006 additional funds of 111,641 were approved by the DEHLG for eight specified re-let repairs.

An amount of €417,000 has been included for 2007.

Central Heating Initiative

In July 2004 the DEHLG announced a new central heating programme to assist Councils to provide central heating facilities, attic insulation, draught proofing, pipe lagging and the installation of a mains operated smoke alarm in all their rented dwellings.

A total of €2,065,760 has been spent on this programme to date.

It is proposed to complete this 3-year programme in 2008. The sum of €1,679,000 has been included for 2007 to complete 230 units.

Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS)

This is a new arrangement to cater for the provision of housing for long-term rent supplement recipients (of 18 months plus) through the sourcing by Housing Authorities of accommodation from the private rented market. The Council has taken over this responsibility from the Health Services Executive. The scheme is to be cost neutral in 2007.

Estate Management

Under the Estate Management initiative, grants totalling €45,000 approximately will be paid to Residents Associations.

The balance of the budget will be spent on addressing such issues as general maintenance, anti social behaviour, provision of ramps and traffic calming measures, environmental improvements, the promotion of youth and senior citizen involvement in our estates and other appropriate activities.

Disabled Persons/Essential Repair Grants

An amount of €1,608,000 was provided in the Council's budget in 2006 for Disabled Persons and Essential Repair grants. In October 2006 the DEHLG increased the provision to €2,408,000 and approved the use of surplus internal capital receipts in respect of this Council's one-third contribution.

It is proposed to include an amount of €1,608,000 under this heading in 2007. Approximately two-thirds of the expenditure will be recouped from the DEHLG. This provision will enable the Council to deal with all current applications and a substantial number of new applications.

PROGRAMME GROUP 2 – ROAD TRANSPORTATION & SAFETY

Estimated Expenditure €20,312,000

Estimated Income €14,082,000

Road Upkeep and Improvement

The allocations for road upkeep and improvement in 2006 were as follows:

National Primary Road Upkeep	€1,217,000
National Secondary Road Upkeep	€ 609,000
Regional Roads (Restoration Maintenance)	€ 568,000
Regional Road (Discretionary Maintenance)	€ 636,000
County Roads (Restoration Maintenance)	€1,093,000
Regional Roads (Restoration Improvement)	€1,660,000
County Road (Restoration Improvement)	€2,576,000
Low Cost Safety Measures	€ 319,000
County Roads Discretionary Improvement	€ 538,000
Class 2 and 3 County Roads	€ 309,000
Community Involvement in Road works	€ 220,000
Local Improvement Schemes	€ 750,000

The Budget for 2007 includes an increase of 10% across all of the above headings and is based on providing a similar level of service to that provided in 2006.

It is proposed to provide a sum of €1,373,000 for County Roads Ordinary Maintenance in 2007, an increase of 17%.

Multi Annual Road Works Programme

A review of the Multi Annual Road Works Programme will go before the area meetings of the Council in January/February 2007.

Footpath Improvements

An amount of €736,500 was spent in 2006 on the maintenance of existing footpaths and the provision of new footpaths in the County. This included expenditure for footpaths in areas served by Portlaoise and Mountmellick Town Councils.

It is proposed to prepare a three-year programme for the maintenance of existing footpaths and the provision of new footpaths in the County in early 2007. An amount of €336,500 is included in this budget for the maintenance of existing footpaths. This will be supplemented in 2007 by Development contributions of 425,000 to fund new footpaths in the County.

Flashing Lights

A provision of €50,000 is included for flashing lights at a number of primary schools in the County. This is part of a 2-year programme that is on today's Council Agenda for approval.

It should be noted that additional flashing lights under the Clar Programme supplemented the Council's 2006 programme.

Community Involvement Scheme

It is proposed to continue with the special Community Involvement Contribution Scheme and an amount of €44,000 has again been provided as the Council's contribution towards the improvement of roads in Council housing estates. This will supplement the grant to be made available by the DEHLG.

Traffic Management

It is proposed, with the consent of the members to introduce pay and display parking in Mountrath, Mountmellick and Portarlinton in 2007.

It is proposed to increase parking charges in 2007 from 60 cent per hour to 70 cent per hour. This new rate compares very favourably with the parking charge rates in adjoining towns.

These proposals will result in an additional income of €110,000 in 2007.

PROGRAMME GROUP 3 – WATER SUPPLY & SEWERAGE

Estimated Expenditure €7,579,000

Estimated Income €2,990,000

Public Water Supply Schemes

The sum of €2,448,000 is provided for the operation and maintenance of public water supply schemes. The budget takes into account the high element of fixed costs in the form of labour, energy and chemicals. The cost of energy and chemicals will continue to increase as the population of the county increases.

Public Sewerage Schemes

The sum of €2,333,000 is provided for the operation and maintenance of public sewerage schemes and for sludge disposal, an increase of €130,000 on 2006. Public sewerage schemes, also, have a high element of fixed costs and the increase for 2007 is mainly due to the increasing cost of sludge disposal and the demand for waste water treatment. The treatment and disposal of sludge from the Portlaoise Waste Water Treatment Plant is included in the scope of work under the Portlaoise Main Drainage D.B.O. Scheme.

New plants have been provided in the Swan, Abbeyleix, Mountrath, Durrow and Rathdowney and they will be operational from January 2007. A new plant is being provided in Ballinakill and this will be in operation by mid 2007.

PROGRAMME GROUP 4 – Development Incentives & Control

Estimated Expenditure €4,291,000

Estimated Income €2,055,000

Land Use Planning

The amount of 2,004,000 is proposed in 2007 for Building Control and Planning Control, Enforcement and Forward Planning.

Economic Development

The Council continues to support and to co-operate with all local and national development agencies to promote the social and economic development of the County.

The amount of €160,000 provides for promotional events, advertising and specialist services.

County Development Board

An amount of €305,000 is proposed in 2007 for the County Development Board.

National Disability Strategy

An amount of €200,000 is included to enable the Council comply with the 2005 Disability Act.

Tourist Promotion

An amount of €280,000 is being provided for tourist promotion and includes a contribution of €25,000 to East Coast and Midland Tourism.

A provision has been included for the World Fleadh Irish and Celtic Music Festival.

PROGRAMME GROUP 5 – ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Estimated Expenditure €11,033,000

Estimated Income €5,630,000

Waste Management and Disposal

The sum of €4,785,000 is provided for waste disposal in 2007.

This provision is necessary for: -

- a) the operation of the landfill site to the highest standards in accordance with E.U. Environmental Directives,
- b) the operation of the civic amenity site at Kyletalesha,
- c) the phased recoupment of expenditure on capital works carried out in the landfill to date (€3,000,000 approximately),
- d) the loan charges required for further works of €3 million in accordance with E.P.A. licence requirements,
- e) the creation of a fund for landfill aftercare and restoration and
- f) the provision required for new cell development.

Due to market forces it is anticipated that the intake of waste at Kyletalesha landfill will be reduced next year.

The landfill levy is paid over monthly to the DEHLG's Environmental Fund, which is distributed to Councils to provide bring bank facilities and Civic Amenity Sites. Grants are, also, given towards waste enforcement.

A grant of €622,000 was allocated by the DEHLG towards the cost of providing the new Civic Amenity Centre at Kyletalesha, Portlaoise.

An amount of €105,000 is included under Waste Regulation for legal and other costs arising from enforcement action taken in relation to unauthorised waste activities.

Significant funding is included for Waste Management (€341,500) to fund the programme of work of the Environmental Awareness Officer. The servicing of the bring banks places a substantial burden on the Council (€151,000 in 2007), part of which is offset by grant aid under the Environmental Fund. Every effort is being made to ensure that the Council obtains value for money in this area.

It is proposed to appoint a Green Business Officer in 2007. This is an objective of the new Waste Management Plan for the Midlands Region.

The budgeted provision of €195,000 for anti-litter measures covers the cost of the litter warden service, Clean up Laois Week, specific clean ups (10,000 in each area), provision of litter bins and other anti litter measures.

A Waste Enforcement programme is included in the amount of €186,000. The Waste Enforcement Team has been very successful in dealing with unauthorised waste activities throughout the County.

Burial Grounds

Provision has been made for the continuation of the grant scheme to Burial Ground Committees who put in a lot of voluntary effort to maintain cemeteries. An amount of 20,000 is being provided towards the cost of a toilet in Portlaoise Cemetery.

The transfer to capital is to fund the cost of development works in Mountmellick, Annatrim, Killeshin, Borris in Ossory and Sleaty.

Water Safety

The sum of 16,500 is being provided for Water Safety and includes for the installation of lifebuoys and signs along the river Owenass Walking Route in Mountmellick.

Fire Protection

The sum of €3,177,000 is included for Fire Protection. The Fire Service Change Programme will be rolled out in 2007. All national schools in the County will be visited and a specifically designed fire safety education programme will be delivered to each third class.

Improvements to Mounmellick Fire Station will be undertaken in the new year.

Pollution Control

The Phosphorous Regulations require an improvement in river water quality with respect to phosphates by the year 2007. The amounts provided for phosphates, ground water protection and the enforcement of the Nitrates Directives represent the minimum amounts required for this Council to fulfil its obligations under Environmental legislation.

A weir will be constructed in Abbeyleix in 2007 to monitor flows

In addition to its own laboratory the Council, also, avail of the Regional Laboratory in Kilkenny operated by the Environment Protection Agency. Additional sampling will take place at the Regional Laboratory due to the Water Framework Directive.

PROGRAMME GROUP 6 – RECREATION & AMENITY

Estimated Expenditure €4,333,000

Estimated Income €901,000

Swimming Pools

The new Swimming Pool and Leisure Centre in Portlaoise will open in 2007, as will the refurbished pool in Portarlington. The Council will be providing initial seed money to the two swimming pool committees for their start up costs and will make a contribution (refundable) towards their first month's wages and salaries.

The Council will continue to provide financial support to the swimming pool in Ballinakill.

Libraries

An additional €190,000 has been provided in 2007 for the operation of the Library Service. The increase is to make provision for the restructuring of staffing following the settlement of a national claim and for extra public opening hours in a number of the branches.

Provision is made for the replacement of bookshelves in a number of the Libraries (phased basis) and for the automation of the library system in Stradbally.

The salaries of the staff assigned to the Prison Service will be recouped from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

€98,000 is included to complete the purchasing of stock for Abbeyleix Library.

The general provision for the purchase of books is being increased to €222,000. This is in line with the per capita Department requirement of €3.30.

The Library - transfer to capital includes 32,000 towards the cost of the Abbeyleix Library Development of €2 million and €28,500 for the renovations carried out to Rathdowney Library and as a provision towards a new library in Mountmellick.

Parks/Open Spaces

The sum of €154,000 includes provision for the employment of the County Horticulturist, the purchase of equipment and materials as well as contracts for the maintenance of parks and open spaces in Portlaoise.

Playing Facilities

An amount of €60,000 has been included for the maintenance costs of playing facilities in Portlaoise, Portarlington, Abbeyleix, Mountrath and a skate park in Portlaoise.

Heritage

The sum of €208,000 has been included for Heritage. The maximum grant of €102,000 from the Heritage Council is dependent on this level of expenditure.

Community Initiatives

The sum of €176,000 includes provision for National Tree Week, grants to local Communities and Tidy Towns Committees and a fund for community projects amounting to €37,500.

Dunamaise Arts Centre

The Arts Council, since 2000, has had a policy of funding the Dunamaise Arts Centre to the same level as that provided by this Council. An amount of €170,000 is included as this Council's contribution for 2007.

Arts Activities

The School of Music will be funded by an amount of €35,000 from this Council with the remaining €182,000 being funded by the Arts Council, V.E.C. and fees payable by the students of the school.

Central Management Charge

Estimated Expenditure €6,754,000

Expenditure in this area relates to services of a general nature, which are not specific to any programme group. These costs are summarised here and apportioned over the eight programme groups. The apportionment is on the basis of gross revenue expenditure (excluding central management charges) as directed by Departmental circulars.

Office Accommodation

The provision for maintenance of office accommodation covers the costs of maintaining Council offices at the Mill and Aras an Chontae, Portlaoise and the area offices of Portlaoise, Stradbally, Borris in Ossory, Mountmellick and Portarlinton.

The Council is examining options to decentralise services to other towns in the County.

Performance Management Development System (P.M.D.S.)

P.M.D.S. was introduced by the Government to enhance the performance and development of employees in Local Government. The system was implemented in all sections of the Council in 2006.

Contingency Fund

A provision of €50,000 to deal with contingencies, which may arise, from time to time from weather conditions or other unplanned events is, again, included.