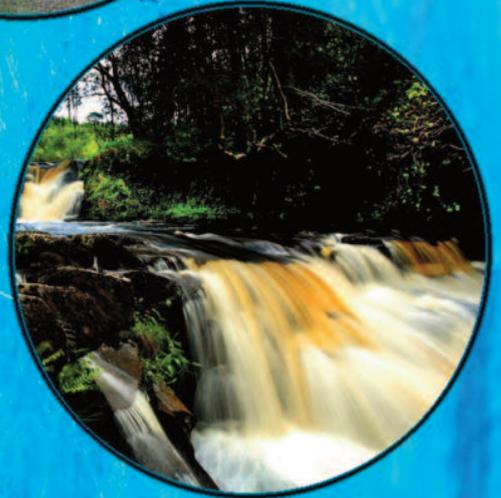
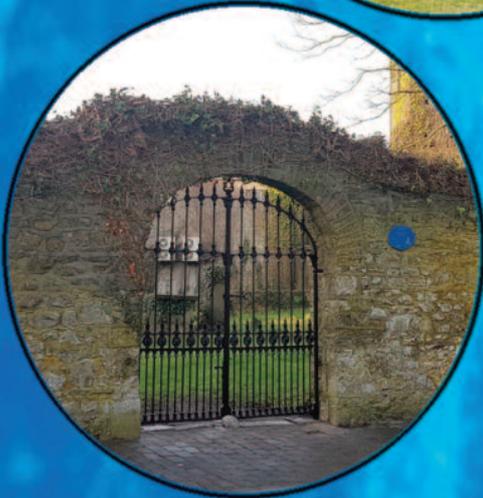
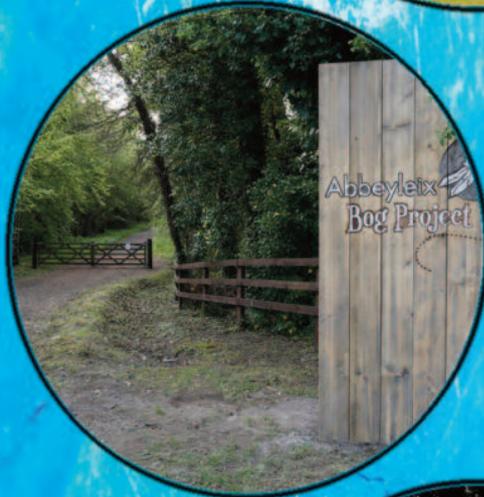
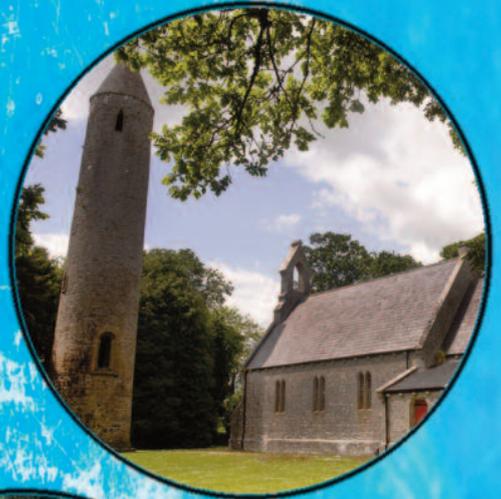
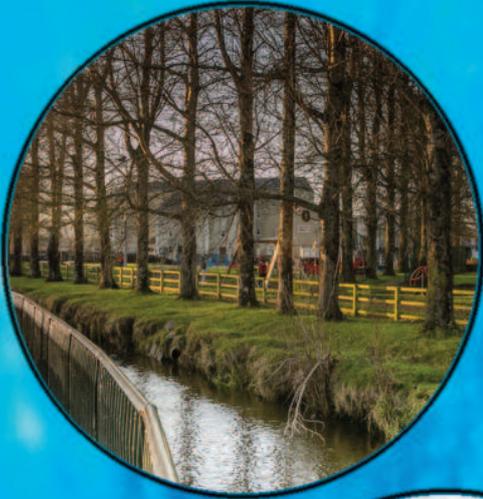




# Comhairle Chontae Laoise Laois County Council



## Tuarascáil Bhliantúil Annual Report 2017

## CONTENTS

<b>Joint Address by the Cathaoirleach and Chief Executive</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Mission Statement</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Members of Laois County Council</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Corporate Affairs, Corporate Planning and Human Resources</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Community, Social, Culture and Heritage</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Transportation, Environment and Emergency Services</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Economic Development, Enterprise and Planning</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Housing</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Financial Management</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Information Communications Technology</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Other Activities</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>How to Contact Us</b>	<b>58</b>

We are very pleased to present the Laois County Council Annual Report for 2017.

This report outlines the range and diversity of activities undertaken by the Council during the year and proves our commitment in providing high quality, accessible and inclusive services for all our citizens.

2017 in particular has demonstrated more than ever, the importance of Local Government in community development and growth with communities such as Abbeyleix in the Entente Florale and Kiln Lane, Mountrath in the Pride of Place Competetition achieving great success on the National and International stage. We congratulate both communities on their outstanding efforts and their representation of all that is positive in this county.

A new County Development Plan for the County was adopted in 2017 to cover the period 2017 – 2023. Work also commenced on the Local Area Plan for Portlaoise, Portarlington and Mountmellick. GVA Bilfinger and Consultants finalised “A Vision for Portlaoise - A Strategy for a better Town Centre” which is a plan that re-examines and repurposes the town centre of Portlaoise to succeed in a changing social, environmental and economic context to 2040 and beyond.

Our Housing Department continued its progress in providing homes with the acquisition of 48 units for social housing at various locations across the county and it is expected that the construction of 33 new housing units at Conniberry Way, Portlaoise will be completed in early 2018

The concept of shared services centre is now well embedded in the Local Authority system and Laois County Council can be proud on attaining the CORE HR Customer Award for Shared Service Excellence 2017.

The Council is also intent on maximizing Laois’ attractiveness as a centre of excellence in tourism and in this regard has complete a new tourism strategy for county Laois which includes developing a promotional plan for the county.

Another milestone in 2017 was the official launch of the Laois County Council’s Business Support Unit which comprises the Local Enterprise Office and the Economic Development Unit to form a centre point of contact for existing and prospective businesses.

In the area of Arts, Music and Heritage, the Council delivers very strongly to the citizens of the county. In addition, a wide range of services are provided through our Library network.

We look forward to the continued development of our county in 2018, the improvement of towns, the creation of an environment for job creation and the provision of housing for our citizens. We will continue to maintain the same high standards of public service as we have in 2017 to ensure that Laois County Council continues to lead the way for 2018.



## 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 which provides an extensive and diverse range of services that impact upon the county’s economic, social, environmental, infra-structural, industrial, tourism, and cultural activities. These services include the provision and maintenance of houses, roads, planning and economic development, waste management, environmental protection, recreational activities, libraries, cultural and community development, including recreation and sport. Laois County Council act as agents for the delivery of water and waste water services. 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 2017 were usually held on the last Monday of each month in the Council Chamber at Áras an Chontae. There were fifteen meetings held in 2017 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 12 occasions in 2017.

### Municipal Districts

The following are the details in relation to the number of Municipal District Meetings held in 2017:

Borris-in-Ossory/Mountmellick Municipal District - 13 meetings  
Graiguecullen/Portarlinton Municipal District - 12 meetings  
Portlaoise Municipal District - 12 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.)



Noel  
Tuohy  
(Labour)



Catherine  
Fitzgerald  
(F.F.)



Caroline  
Dwane Stanley  
(S.F.)



Sadly Cllr J Lodge (F.F)  
passed away on  
03/04/2018. Ar dheis Dé  
go raibh a anam uasail.

### 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:** Donal Brennan  
**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 provides 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 2017.

**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](http://www.laois.ie). This Charter which includes a commitment to equality in service provision and a recognition of the diverse nature of the community we serve was reviewed in 2017 to take account of the provisions of the newly adopted policy in relation to acceptable customer behaviour. 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**



- 23rd January 2017 - Civic Reception for Min-

ister Charles Flanagan in recognition of his appointment to the Office of Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

- 30th March 2017 - Civic Reception for Laois I.F.A. - in honour of the Laois IFA members who participated in the 1966 Farmers’ Rights March



- 18th May 2017 Civic Reception in honour of Nicole Turner in recognition of her achievements in swimming and her participation in the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio.
- 1st June 2017 Cathaoirleach’s Reception in honour of the Cooper Family Syndicate, owners of “Our Duke”, winner of the 2017 Irish Grand National.
- 8th June 2017 Municipal District Reception in honour of Portarlinton Lions Club, Winner of Lions Club of the Year, 2016

The total cost of the above was €4,473.44

**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](http://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.

If you wish to contact the Council in Irish, please send an e-mail to [gaeilge@laoiscoco.ie](mailto:gaeilge@laoiscoco.ie).

## Annual Service Delivery Plan

The Members at their meeting held on 27th February 2017 adopted the Service Delivery Plan for 2017. The implementation of the Plan will be reviewed early in 2018 as part of the process of developing the 2018 Plan. The performance of the Council in relation to the performance indicators as specified by NOAC will also be taken into account.

## Health & Safety

**Health & Safety Officer:** Jim Bolger

The CORE system Health and Safety Module roll-out of our Safety Management System (SMS) continued reflecting compatibility with the CORE module. In the midlands region, a cross Local Authority safety auditing initiative continued with the Fire Services in Offaly County Council partaking in same. In addition, the implementation of cross-directorate safety inspection programme served to further develop our 'evidence base'. Through Irish Waters' Health, Safety, Quality and Environmental (HSQE) auditing programme our Water Services department continued to measure safety performance.

Our MyPay section continued to recruit thus ensuring the need to provide ongoing safety induction training. In relation to statutory safety training the provision of 'manual handling' and 'safe pass' training was prioritised.

All employees who have intranet access can access our legislative database which serves to ensure that Laois County Council keep abreast of legislative developments.

The implementation and monitoring of the Council's inoculation programme continued during 2017.

## Partnership

The following were the members of the Workplace Partnership Committee as at 31st December, 2017.

### 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)  
Rosa Bray

The Partnership Committee held 3 meetings during

2017.

## 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 2017

Applications on hand at 31st Dec. 2016	Nil
Applications received in 2017	101
Decisions taken during 2017	92
Applications not continued with	6
Applications dealt with outside of FOI	3
Applications on hand at 31st Dec. 2017	9

### Nature of Information sought

Personal (to applicant)	22
Non personal	79

### Appeals

There were 2 appeals to the Information Commissioner in 2017.

### Source of Requests

General Public, Solicitors & Others	76
Journalists	25

### 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 two indicators.

The report in respect of 2016 was published by NOAC in January 2018.

Laois County Council's performance in each area in 2016 is included in this report in each of the relevant sections.

### Reporting of Protected Disclosures

No disclosures were received by the Designated Officer for Protected Disclosures during 2017.

**Property Management Section**

The Property Management Section carries out the day-to-day property management functions of the Council while also maintaining the Property Interest Register system. Disposals/Leases, Acquisition of property/land, the Mortgage to Rent Scheme (Housing) and Land Registry searches were all carried out in 2017 together with the mapping and recording of historical land and property assets of Laois County Council. Work commenced on updating the Fixed As-

sets Register to reconcile with PIR database.

**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, applicants must be at least 18 years of age on the day that the Register comes into force and must have been ordinarily resident in a Constituency on the 1st September

**Register of Electors 2018/2019**

Dáil Constituency	Presidential Electors	Dáil Electors
Laois	56,711	57,504
European Parliament Constituency	European Electors	Potential European Electors
Midlands-North-West	58,218	634
Local Electoral Areas	Number of Electors	Postal and Special Voters
Borris In Ossory - Mountmellick	19,607	Gardaí 0
Graigecullen - Portarlinton	19,616	Defence Forces 223
Portlaoise	<u>20,858</u>	Diplomats 1
Total:	60,081	Physically Disabled 10
		Occupation 0
		Special Voters 12

## HUMAN RESOURCES

### Recruitment Statistics

A total of 499 people were employed by Laois County Council at 31st December 2017.

During 2017 Laois County Council held 23 competitions, in relation to which the following statistics have been extracted:

Total Applications received	375	
	Male	Female
Applicants	211	164
Successful Applicants	70	88

### Permanent Appointments/Promotions 2017

	Male	Female
Appointments	17	12
Promotions	23	9

### Work Life Balance Initiatives

Laois County Council continued to implement work/life balance initiatives for staff during 2017. At year-end 6 employees were availing of the Career Break Scheme, 39 employees were availing of the job/work sharing scheme, 52 employees availed of the Parental Leave Scheme and 28 employees availed of the Shorter Working Year Scheme, 7 employees availed of Unpaid Leave Scheme.

### National Performance Indicators

Performance Indicators in this document are taken from the National Oversight and Audit Commission Report No.14, published on 25th January 2018, which refers to 2016, as this is the most recent data set published.

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

Total no of wholetime equivalents (WTE) staff in LA at 31/12/2016	390.89
Certified	3.95%
Uncertified	0.41%

The national target for absences on certified and un-

certified illness leave is set at 3.5%.

### Industrial Relations

Laois County Council continued to maintain good industrial relations during 2017 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 and 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 Programmes, Third Level Open Learning Programmes and various Seminars/Workshops as they arise.

Total expenditure on training was €275,868.41 (inclusive of expenditure for Fire Services). A comprehensive training programme was delivered throughout 2017. A sample of the training programmes provided is as follows:-

- Safepass
- Health & Safety Staff Briefings
- Chlorine Handling
- Managing Safely in Construction
- Pesticides and Herbicides Training
- Mobile Elevating Training
- Forklift Training
- Location of Underground Services
- Mini Digger Assessment Training
- Traffic Management Planning & Design
- Risk Assessment for Cryptosporidium
- Troubleshooting Activated Sludge
- Dealing with Violence and Aggression
- Competency based Interviewing

### 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. Samples of the Open Learning programmes facilitated during 2017 are as follows:-

- IPA – Certificate/Diploma in Local Government
- WIT – MSc Analytical Science & Quality Management
- IPASS – Certificate in Payroll Techniques
- University of Ulster – Civil Engineering
- University of Wales – MA in Library and Information Studies

### 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 2017:

- Shorter Working Year Scheme
- Bereavement Leave Scheme



### Equality and Supporting Diversity

Laois County Council is an equal opportunity employer and is committed to 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.

**Community, Social, Cultural and Heritage Strategic Policy Committee**

**Director of Services:** Donal Brennan

**Chair:** James Kelly, M.C.C.

**Members** **Sectoral**

Padraig Fleming, M.C.C.	P. J Phelan (PPN Community/Voluntary)
Tom Mulhall, M.C.C.	Bobby Delaney (PPN Environment)
Brendan Phelan, M.C.C.	Donald Scully (Farming Pillar)
	Elizabeth White (PPN Social Inclusion)

**LAOIS LOCAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE (LCDC)**



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 comprises representatives of both public and private sectors and has primary responsibility for co-ordinating, planning and overseeing local and community development in the County.

The LCDC oversees the implementation of:

- Social Inclusion Community Action Programme (SICAP)
- Community objectives in the Local Economic & Community Plan (LECP) 2016 - 2021
- Implementation of the Laois Local Development Strategy operated under the LEADER Programme 2014 – 2020 in partnership with the local authority (Financial Partner) and local development company

(Implementing Partner).

Laois LCDC comprises membership from both statutory and non-statutory bodies as follows:

- Paddy Buggy, Laois PPN (Social Inclusion) & Chairperson
- John Mulholland, Chief Executive, Laois County Council
- Cllr John King, Laois County Council
- Cllr Jerry Lodge(RIP), Laois County Council
- Cllr Pascal McEvoy, Laois County Council
- Evelyn Reddin, Laois Local Enterprise Office
- Mary Delaney, Health Services Executive
- David Hackett (RIP), Dept. of Social Protection
- Tony Dalton, Laois/Offaly Education and Training Board
- Anne Goodwin, Laois Partnership Company
- Joe Thompson, Youth Sector
- Kieran Finane, Business Sector
- Dave Fingleton, Laois PPN (Environmental Pillar)
- Michael Bergin, Farming Sector
- Mary White, Laois PPN (Social Inclusion)
- Robbie Quinn, Laois PPN (Community/ Voluntary)
- P J Campbell, Laois PPN (Community/ Voluntary)

LCDC Chief Officer - Michael Rainey

**LAOIS LOCAL ECONOMIC & COMMUNITY PLAN 2016 – 2021**

The LCDC also monitors delivery of the community elements of the Local Economic and Community Plan 2016 - 2021(LECP). This Plan was compiled in agreement with a number of public sector stakeholders, under both community and economic development headings. It was adopted by Laois County Council in March 2016 and it is the agreed strategic framework for economic and community development resource allocation for the county.



**LAOIS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION NETWORK**

The Public Participation Network (PPN) is the 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 410 groups registered. The PPN has a Secretariat consisting of 12 members and 30 representative positions. PPN representatives represent the PPN on local authority and other decision making committees in Laois. Laois PPN have a dedicated PPN Resource Worker and an office at Lyster Square Carpark, JFL Avenue, Portlaoise, Co Laois

During 2017, Laois PPN held 2 County Plenaries, one of which incorporated a Crime Prevention Event and Meet your PPN Representative Session for Community Groups. In September 2017, an Information Session for Older People was held in association with the Older Peoples Forum. The Disability Special Interest Group was successfully established during 2017.

During 2017, Laois PPN also held a training session for PPN Representatives and Secretariat members.

Laois PPN's website was also launched in early 2017.

Next steps in development of the PPN include roll-out of Capacity Building training for member groups.



**COMMUNITY & VOLUNTARY AWARDS 2017**

The heroes of local communities across the County were celebrated by Laois County Council in association with Laois Public Participation Network on Tuesday 17th October when over 250 people gathered in The Midlands Park Hotel, Portlaoise for the 8th Annual Community and Voluntary Awards. The Awards

aim to recognise the tremendous contribution made by community and voluntary groups to life in County Laois and welcomed 45 nominees across 6 categories, with 23 individuals nominated for their outstanding contribution to their local community, the unsung heroes of our county. All nominees were recognised as having made a significant difference within and beyond their local community, through giving of their time and their hard work to achieve rewards of successful clubs, events and fundraising within the community. Each group and individual was congratulated on the night and presented with a certificate acknowledging their contribution to the community and voluntary effort in Laois.

The winners and runners up in 2017 were:

**ENVIRONMENT CATEGORY - 6 NOMINEES**

WINNER: Abbeyleix Tidy Towns  
 Runner Up: Durrow Development Forum

**CHILDREN & YOUTH CATEGORY – 6 NOMINEES**

WINNER: Spink Comhaltas  
 Runner Up: Mountrath Foróige Club

**AGE FRIENDLY CATEGORY – 6 NOMINEES**

WINNER: Portlaoise Active Retirement Group  
 Runner Up: Portlaoise Men's Shed

**ARTS, CULTURE & HERITAGE – 7 NOMINEES**

WINNER: Durrow Development Forum  
 Runner Up: Yarn Bombing Mountmellick

**HEALTHY & ACTIVE CATEGORY – 10 NOMINEES**

WINNER: Woodenbridge Paddlers Canoe Club  
 Runner Up: Portlaoise AFC

**SOCIAL INCLUSION CATEGORY – 10 NOMINEES**

WINNER: Social Services Borris in Ossory  
 Runner Up: Portarlinton Meals on Wheels

Of the 23 individuals nominated, John Scully from Vicarstown was honoured on the night as 2017 Unsung Hero. All the nominees and winners were congratulated by Cathaoirleach Cllr. Padraig Fleming, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr. Charlie Flanagan, T.D., and Chief Executive of Laois County Council, Mr. John Mulholland, who praised the voluntary effort in Laois and thanked all for their hard work and commitment they put into their local areas and people.



Laois Age Friendly Alliance, an interagency committee tasked with delivering the Age Friendly Programme in Laois, continued to meet in 2017 and implement the objectives set out in the Laois Age Friendly County Strategy 2016 - 2021. These objectives aim to make Laois a better county for older people to live in under the following headings: Outdoor Spaces, Buildings and the Physical Environment, Transportation, Housing, Respect and Social Inclusion, Social Participation, Communication and Information, Civic Participation and Employment and Community Support and Health Services.



The Laois Older People's Forum, comprising county-wide representation of older people, monitor the agency delivery of the Age Friendly Strategy and ensure that it will effect appropriate changes. Actions in the strategy commenced to-date by Laois County Council in partnership with the Older People's Forum include Age Friendly Parking, an Age Friendly Business Recognition Scheme, Message in a Bottle and a Directory of Services for Older People



**COMMUNITY & VOLUNTARY PROJECTS FUND 2017**

The Community & Voluntary Projects Fund provides financial assistance to groups/organisations county-wide via applications recommended by an elected member of Laois County Council. 70 applications under this Fund were submitted in 2017.

**YOUTH SUPPORTS & PARTICIPATION**

**LAOIS AGE FRIENDLY PROGRAMME**

**Laois Comhairle na nÓg**



Laois' Age Friendly Programme is part of a national programme to improve the delivery of services to older people and to improve their quality of life under a number of headings.

Laois Comhairle na nÓg strives to represent young people in Laois and aims to make their voices heard,

in a real way among the adult decision makers in our county, allowing the future generation to help to make our county a better place to live, work and visit.

Co-ordinated by Youth Work Ireland Laois, in association with Laois County Council, the 25 young members of Laois Comhairle na nÓg met over 30 times in 2017 and began working tirelessly towards pinpointing the topics of most importance to the young people of Laois in relation to Education. After much debate, research and the carrying out of a survey, the educational topics of De-stressing and Practical life-skills were picked. These topics were then progressed in the form of carefully picked workshops, with the aim of implementing them through the medium of an ‘app’- “Life in Your Pocket”.

The Comhairle is tasked with the provision of feedback to the young people across the county and does this in a number of ways, including through its links with the 9 secondary schools and Youthreach, youth groups and at its AGM, which was held on the 19th October 2017. The AGM was attended by over 100 young people from across Laois, who gave the Comhairle a mandate to examine the topic of ‘Homelessness’ as well as a continuation of their current project based around “education”; this mandate will form the basis of their work in 2018. Laois Comhairle was also represented in 2017 by 6 delegates who attended the National Comhairle na nÓg “Dáil na nÓg, along with the current and new Laois’ representative on the National Comhairle na nÓg Executive. The 2017 national executive representative Niamh Bakker attended 12 meetings in her role where they compiled a report on the topic of education and areas for improvement. Niamh was also one of four that presented this report to the Oireachtas.

It is the aim of Laois Comhairle na nÓg to consult with the adult decision makers who make policies and plans for our county. During 2017, Comhairle members also presented to the elected members, represented young people at several public consultations/meetings, became youth representatives on a number of committees and met with Oireachtas members to raise issues around youth



service funding in Laois.



### Educational Partnership

The Schools Business Partnership programme “Skills at Work” is aimed at 5th year students in certain secondary schools nationwide and aims to encourage school completion as well as the importance of considering third level education as a viable option for all students, by partnering the school with a business/employer organisation. In the 2017/2018 school year, 21 Portlaoise College students were introduced to several members of Council staff with varying work and education backgrounds and this programme will continue during 2018 to link with Laois County Council on site visits and in their CV preparation and mock interviews. The programme is facilitated by the National Schools Business Partnership and the Dept of Education and Skills.



### YOUTH SUPPORTS

Support for young people in Laois was continued in 2017. The Council is represented on the Rathdowney Youth Café Consortium and both Garda Youth Diversion Projects in Portlaoise and Portarlington.

### SOCIAL INCLUSION

Laois County Council partnered with stakeholders in respect of projects during 2017:

- Laois Sports Partnership Social Inclusion Disability Programme
- Rathdowney Youth Café
- Integration supports for new communities, e.g., residents of the Direct Provision Centre at Emo

Staff of the Community Development section represented the Council on the following Boards/Committees in 2017:

- BLOCK and PORT Garda Youth Diversion Projects
- Laois Mental Health Collaborative Group
- Laois Integration Network
- Midland Traveller Conflict Mediation Initiative
- Portlaoise Citizens Information Centre
- Laois Children & Young Persons Task Group
- Laois Comhairle na nÓg Adult Steering Group

**COMMUNITY SMOKE ALARM SCHEME**

1500 smoke alarms were purchased under the auspices of this national scheme in 2017 and distributed with the expertise and assistance of Laois Fire & Rescue Services.

**LAOIS CONNECTS**



Laois CONNECTS Mental Health Awareness Week 2017 took place between 7th and 14th October and once again it was a great success. This series of events, driven by Laois County Council in partnership with a number of agencies, continues to highlight the awareness of mental health and related issues to a wide audience. This year’s message was about connecting with each other and seeking help/support. Supports were highlighted through a number of events, including a series of walks and physical activity events, public speaking events and information talks across the county. The week was hosted in association with a number of agencies working in collaboration – Laois Sports Partnership, Laois Partnership, HSE MH Services, HSE Suicide Prevention Resource Office, Mental Health Ireland and other organisations that hosted events during the week, in-

cluding Mountmellick Community School, Golden Egg Holistic, to name but a few. The week proved to be a resounding success and plans are in place to host the event again in 2018.



**Performance Indicators 2016**

Percentage of local schools involved in the local Youth Council/Comhairle na nÓg scheme	100%
No. of Organisations on the County Register at 31/12/2016	304
% of Organisations on the County Register that opted to be part of the Social Inclusion College with the PPN	13.16

**TOURISM**

In 2017 Laois County Council continued to promote the county, supporting festivals and events and supporting the Board of Laois tourism.

**The Tourism Grants Scheme 2017**

A total of €27,800 was allocated to festivals and parades through the Laois County Council Tourism Grant Scheme in 2017 including: Darrow All Ireland Scarecrow Festival, The Gordon Bennett Classic Car Run, Laois Walks Festival, Ramble in Eireann High

Nelly Heritage Cycle, Vicarstown Beat the Barge Festival and Festival Francais de Portarlinton. The Council also supported a range of smaller festivals including Rosenallis Festival on Mountain, Laois Fleadh and Laois St. Patrick Day Parades.

**The “Buds & Blossoms” Laois Garden 2017**

The second annual garden festival took place on Sunday June 11th in Spink Community Grounds with garden experts Mairead Lavery, Dermot O’Neill, Fionnuala Fallon and Dr. John McCullen giving talks. A wide range of plant, food and crafts were also on display.

**The Laois International Golf Challenge**

The Laois International Golf Challenge took place from September 26th to 28th. The three day event took place in Killenard, Portarlinton and the final was held in Killenard Golf Course.

**The Old Fort Festival June 23rd – 25th**

The 2nd Annual Old Fort Festival took place on June 23rd, 24th and 25th in Portlaoise Town. An array of historical events were held over the three days, including talks, re-enactments, etc. Street Markets were held throughout the weekend also and music from 6.00p.m. until 11.30 p.m. was also provided during the event.

**Scarecrow Festival July 30th – August 7th**

The 8th Annual Scarecrow Festival took place in from Sunday July 30th to Monday August 7th in Durrow. Large crowds attended the event again this year with plenty of activities for families, including arts & crafts, workshops, music and the scarecrow collection.

**The Gordon Bennett Irish Classic Car Run**



An opening ceremony was held on Friday June 2nd

at Áras an Chontae followed by a weekend long schedule of events.

**Laois Association**

The Laois Association group visited Laois on June 23rd. The Dublin based group are all Laois people living outside the county who return annually. Their visit this year was based around Portlaoise where they visited various places in the town including the Town Park and were also given a tour of County Council buildings. They also met with the Cathaoirleach Cllr Tom Mulhall to discuss his role and that of the Local Authority in Laois.

**Commemoration of 150th Anniversary of William Dargan**

Iarnród Éireann, in conjunction with Laois County Council, Laois Heritage Society and Portlaoise Tidy Towns, unveiled a new memorial to William Dargan in Portlaoise Station to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the famous engineer’s death. The plaque was unveiled at a ceremony on Friday 25th August at Portlaoise Station. Display boards have also been installed in the waiting rooms on both platforms telling the story of William Dargan’s life and work.



**New County Tourism Development Strategy 2017 – 2022:**

W2 Consultants completed a new Tourism Strategy for County Laois which includes developing a promotional plan for the county. To advance the implementation of the Strategy, the Board of Laois Tourism will engage the services of an Animator to assist the Board and to increase the tourist profile of Laois in 2018.

## ARTS SECTION

### Laois School of Music

Enrolment was maintained at 320 pupils and 15 part-time tutors. The 4th Annual Music Festival took place on Sunday 12th March, in association with MGL, with nearly one hundred and twenty participants taking part. Also in March the combined Youth Orchestra travelled to Letterkenny, Donegal to take part in 'Orchestra Afternoon' with the Donegal Music Education Partnership. 100 plus students sat music exams in May with the Royal Irish Academy of Music and Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. The Combined LSM Youth Orchestra (50 performers) participated in the MGL concert 'Music at the Malthouse' which took place on 21st May in Stradbally. September 2017 saw a change of premises to Portlaoise Further Education and Training Centre (Old CBS), Tower Hill as the new Dunamase College opened in our former premises, and the building no longer had the capacity to accommodate our expanding needs. The Licence Agreement with Laois Offaly Education Training Board will apply to Tower Hill going forward. A series of Christmas Concerts took place in the Hall in Portlaoise Further Education and Training Centre and were very well received in this new space.

### Music Generation Laois

In 2017, Music Generation Laois had over 3,000 young people attend weekly music lessons. There were 30 weekly programmes running in over 23 primary schools in the county and over 300 students attending weekly lessons and ensembles in Portlaoise Further Education and Training Centre, both after-school and at weekends. There are six programme strands. There were 20 musicians working on these weekly programmes on both a part and full time basis, and there is a full time Caretaker, a full-time Co-Ordinator and -Assistant Co-Ordinator. In addition, Music Generation Laois hosted a national day for music in special education needs. A group of harpists from attended Edinburgh International Harp Festival; large-scale concerts included 500 performers in a range of genres; 2 summer programmes, a Summer School of Rock and Pop, and a Trad Summer School including a hugely successful gig with trad band Beoga. MGL hosted their 2nd annual Tionól for harps and pipes, a national gathering of harpists and pipers.

### Laois Youth Theatre

Laois Youth Theatre has two groups in Portlaoise. Youth Theatre runs in Portarlinton in association with the Portarlinton Afterschools Group and in Moun-

trath with the MDA. The programme includes weekly workshops for up to 80 children/young people led by qualified drama tutors. Plays included an excerpt from "Around the World in 80 Days" and "Wrap up Warm".



### Dunamase Arts Centre

Laois County Council continues to support the Dunamase Arts Centre as one of the main Arts venues in Laois. The Laois Arts Office continues to work collaboratively with the Dunamase on numerous programmes.

### The Arthouse Stradbally

In 2017, the Arthouse Gallery hosted six individual exhibitions, as well as artist residencies, art workshops, tours and talks. Highlight events included "Time and Space", an exhibition of the Laois winners of the 2017 Texaco Children's Art Competition, curated by the overall winner, Laois native, Lucy Deegan. "Other highlights included "Doorways of Stradbally", an exhibition by the active retirement group in Stradbally, an exhibition and master classes for adults with renowned artist John Keating in June, and the continuation of "Townscape" with Artist Mary Burke utilising the percent for art scheme. The apartments and studios were occupied over the year and residencies include sculptor Simon Carman who is working in McKeon Stone on a monumental equine sculpture for the National Stud.



### The Artists in Schools Scheme

The Artists in Schools Scheme ran in nine schools in 2017. 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 2017 and distributed nationally and throughout the Midlands region.

### Exhibition: 30 Years, Artists, Places

Following an 18-month national tour to venues in Clare, Mayo, Waterford, Cork, Tipperary, Limerick, Cavan, Louth, Dublin and Donegal, the final exhibition, curated by Muireann Ní Chonaill, was held in the Dunamais Arts Centre. This exhibition consisted of artworks owned by Local Authorities across Ireland and marks thirty years since the first local authority Arts Officer was appointed. A panel discussion to mark the exhibition, entitled Collecting: Who for What, was hosted to mark the conclusion of the exhibition.

### Summer Arts programme

A series of arts and craft, drama, pottery and paper craft ran over three days in July throughout the county incorporating socially inclusive projects in Mountmellick and Rathdowney.

### National Culture Night

Culture Night 2017 in Laois was a great success with

twenty one separate events in the county on Friday 22nd September. Highlights included Anam – Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland performance at the Dunamais Arts Centre, a samba drum performance at the plaza, Áras an Chontae, an exhibition of art from the National Texaco Art Competition in Laois Arthouse and open studio events in Mountrath and Ballyfin. The first Laois Culture Night Ambassador, Lucy Deegan, a young artist from Lugacurren was appointed.



### Leaves Literature Festival



Leaves Festival of Writing and Music in November, delivered a rich and diverse programme. A weekend of readings, discussions, music, spoken word performance, workshops and a celebration of National Harp Day were held in the wonderful surroundings of Emo Court and the premiere of “Thresholds” a music composition written especially for and including Laois participants on the theme of pollination. The Dunamais Arts Centre and Laois Libraries also included events in the festival programme.

### Other activities included

- Arts Act Grants Awards
- Tyrone Guthrie Centre Bursary
- Exhibitions
- Support of Festivals and community arts events

- Laois Creative Ireland Programme

### Laois Creative Ireland Programme

The Creative Ireland Plan is co-ordinated by Muireann Ní Chonail, Arts Officer. It started in 2017 and runs for the next five years. Funding of €69,516 was received to run this programme, which enhances the cultural programming in the county.

A meeting was held in April to disseminate information on the Creative Ireland Laois programme and it drew considerable public interest. The plan for the year was launched in July by Minister Charles Flanagan, TD.

- **Music Generation Laois Commission for Harp Orchestra.**

Music Generation Laois commissioned Michéal Rooney to create a suite of music for harp orchestra, in collaboration with young harpists from the Music Generation Laois Trad programme. This new work was premiered as part of a national Tionól: Harps & Pipes in November 2017 in Laois and brought over 50 young harpists together to perform as an ensemble.

- **Spoken Word Project**

Laois County Council, in partnership with the Arts Council of Ireland and Creative Ireland commenced a Spoken Word Residency. The successful artist is Stephen James Smith and the programmes runs until May 2018. The target group for this project are young people, aged 12 to 20 years. Spoken Word is an increasingly popular performance art that many young people use as an outlet for self-expression.

- **Library Branch Events**

Membership and visits to Laois County Libraries continues to increase. Children's events and activities will continue to be the focus for Creative Ireland Programme support during 2017. Access to free events, classes, talks and coding workshops was provided in 2017. In order to celebrate the creative history of Laois and develop and nurture our cultural and creative heritage, an allocation of funding allowed for additional programming with a focus on Arts, Crafts, Heritage and Sciences.

- **Community Grants Scheme**

A Community Grant Scheme was funded

which awarded financial support to local and community groups, artistic and creative practitioners, event organisers and those involved in creative activities and projects, to encourage cultural participation throughout Laois.

- **Walking back to my heart- Portlaoise Film Project**

"Walking Portlaoise" is an independent film documentary produced in Portlaoise by Ann Marie Kelly. A group of primary school children from various cultural backgrounds were picked to take part in workshops and armed with the knowledge and stories learned, they went on to host a family friendly Heritage Trail for Laois Heritage Week.

- **Cruinniú na Cásca**



To celebrate Cruinniú na Cásca, (directly translated as a meeting at Easter) on Easter Monday 2017, a stimulating and enjoyable showcase of young people across various art forms took place in the Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise. Cruinniú na Cásca was a national day of culture and creativity. The event included performances by children from Senior Infants class in Holy Family School. Over a number of weeks they rehearsed with dance artist Erica Borges, and teacher Jennie Buggy. They were accompanied on stage by teenagers from the Laois Youth Dance Ensemble. The second half included a performance by guest artist John Spillane and the Music Generation Laois National School Choir, represented by Barnashrone NS, Rath NS and the talented youth folk group, Lonrach. Songs performed by John, Music Generation Laois, the Choir and Lonrach included The Dance of the Cherry Tree and one hundred Snow White Horses. The finale event included a screening of an animation film inspired by this song, devised by artist Caroline Conway, who

worked with Paddock NS.

## SPORT & LEISURE SECTION

The Sport and Leisure Section continued to deliver a successful series of events and activities during 2017. Highlights included;

### Leisure and Play facilities

Both Portlaoise and Portarlington Leisure Centres continue to deliver excellent public leisure services in County Laois. Additionally, Portarlington Leisure Centre achieved the Ireland Active White Flag - Gold Medal Award 2017/18. Laois County Council continued to manage twenty community play facilities which require significant annual maintenance and repair programme to maintain a high quality of service.

Summer 2017 saw the refurbishment of Portlaoise Leisure Centre Playground with the installation of a new climbing unit and swings. The playground was re-opened to the public in July 2017. The refurbishment was part-funded by a grant from the Department of Children & Youth Affairs.

In 2017, Laois County Council was awarded a grant of €14,000 to install sensory equipment in Portarlington Playground. This work will be carried out in 2018.



### Bike Week 2017

Funding of €5,500 was secured by the Council from the Department of Transport Tourism & Sport to deliver the 2017 Bike Week Programme. This funding was used to co-ordinate a series of events with the assistance of Community groups countywide. Bike Week is a national programme which encourages people to use their bicycles for travel and leisure between the 10th and 18th June.

The Council's Sport and Leisure Section co-ordinated 23 events during the week and was attended by over

800 participants throughout County Laois. Resident groups including Kiln Lane Residence Association & The Glen Residence Association Portarlington organised cycle events for their residents and friends. County Laois Primary schools organised cycles to and from school. Community groups such as the Woodenbridge Paddlers, Ossory Cycle Club, SVT Active Community Hub encouraged locals in their communities to try cycling as an activity. Laois County Council staff continued to embrace Bike Week and organised lunchtime cycles for staff & members



### Children and Young People Activity Programme

### 2017 Summer Brochure

The Sport and Leisure office produced its annual guide to summer activities for families and 10,000 copies were distributed throughout schools and libraries in County Laois.

### Parks Tennis 2017

Laois County Council organised and delivered a very varied summer programme in 2017 throughout the county. Parks Tennis was delivered in Abbeyleix, Mountmellick, Portlaoise and Portarlington with 175 children participating in this programme.

### National Play Day 2017

Laois County Council delivered a programme of free events in Páirc an Phobail, Portlaoise, Heritage House Abbeyleix and Mountrath Amenity Area to celebrate National Play Day in July 2017. Activities included "Create a Castle" sandcastle building, Play dough making, Jewellery Making and Art & messy play. These events were extremely popular with children and parents alike. Funding towards National Play Day was provided by the Department of Children & Youth Affairs.

National Recreation Week 2016



National Recreation Week 2017 is a joint initiative between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Local Authorities. It is aimed at young people aged 12 to 18 years and the overall purpose of the event in 2017 was to highlight the importance of recreation for young people and to encourage them to try an outdoor activity. Funding was provided by the Department of Children & Youth Affairs to deliver a week long programme, that included an adventure hike in the Slieve Blooms, Canoeing Trip on the Grand Canal, Camp Craft and an adventure activity day in Páirc an Phobail, Portlaoise. All events were delivered in County Laois and thoroughly enjoyed by all participants

Games on the Green

Laois County Council continued its successful partnerships with FAI, Leinster Rugby and 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 13 years for 12 weeks, on a weekly basis. The locations in the 2017 programme were The Village Estate Ballylinan, Kiln Lane, Mountrath, Kirwan Park, Mountmellick, Balladine, Abbeyleix and Quigley Park Rathdowney. In total 292 children participated in the programme which culminated in a Grand Finale held at Portlaoise Leisure Centre in June 2017 with Cathaoirleach, Pádraig Fleming in attendance.

Chess Development Programme

The Sport & Leisure Section & Library Service worked together in 2017 to encourage children to take up chess and support the development of chess clubs in branch libraries. In December 2017, the first Laois

County Council Junior Chess Tournament was held in Portlaoise College with 96 children participating. An Cathaoirleach, Pádraig Fleming presented the prizes to the winning school, club and individual players.

Special Projects 2017

CLÁR MEASURE 2 PROJECTS

The CLÁR programme is a targeted capital investment programme for rural areas which have experienced significant levels of depopulation. The programme is funded by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and is delivered, for the most part, by Local Authorities in consultation with local communities. Three primary schools in CLÁR areas received funding from the Department to upgrade their playground facilities. The successful applicants were Camross NS, Ballyadams NS and Gaelscoil Thromaire

RURAL RECREATION INFRASTRUCTURAL PROJECTS

The Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme is part of the Governments Action Plan for Rural Development and provides funding for the development of new outdoor recreational infrastructure or the necessary maintenance, enhancement or promotion of existing outdoor recreational infrastructure in Ireland. The programme is funded through the Department of Rural & Community Development.

Measure 1 Funding – Eight Projects were funded to carry out essential maintenance on walking & cycling Routes

Measure 2 - Two projects were successfully funded: Provision of Additional Car Park/Trail in Glenbarrow - €95,930 and the development of Triogue Blueway in Portlaoise €99,500

Measure 3 Application - Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Project was allocated funding of €1m

Active Community Hubs

The Sport & Leisure Section continued to work with Laois Sports Partnership and local communities to provide support for Stradbally/Vicarstown/Timahoe Hub & new Rathdowney/Errill Hub. The aim of the active community hubs is to encourage and support local communities to be more proactive in planning and delivering physical activity programmes at local level.

Healthy Ireland Projects 2017

Healthy Ireland Funding was provided in 2017 for the

the following to be delivered by the Sport & Leisure Section

- Installation of Pool Hoist - Portarlington Leisure Centre Swimming €17,500.00
- Enhancement of Physical Activity and Recreational Provision, Peoples Park Portarlington €10,000.00
- Delivery of Park Activity Programmes - Portlaoise and Portarlington €3,000.00

### Support of Clubs/Community Groups

During 2017, the Sports & Leisure Office continued to work with clubs, schools & community groups to apply for and draw down funding to develop their facilities.

### Support of Kiln Lane - Pride of Place Entry

The Sport & Leisure Section provided support and programmes during 2017 to Kiln Lane Residents Association in their preparation for Pride of Place. Kiln Lane Residents were successful in winning Best Estate Category at the National Pride of Place Awards.

## LIBRARIES

The Library service continues to play a pivotal role for all communities in County Laois. They offer an efficient frontline service for all members providing them with access to books, media, online services and internet/wifi. 2017 has seen an increase in membership with over 12,000 patrons joining the library, while the number of visits also continues to rise with over 245,000 recorded for the year. The continued investment in adult and juvenile stock has resulted in the issue of over 230,000 items including books, audio-books, periodicals, DVDs and local history material.

The libraries work with many groups within their communities and offer varied events and exhibition programmes. This year, there were over 1,200 events hosted across the county with over 17,000 people in attendance. Highlights include author visits, knitting groups, ciórcal comhrá and book clubs, while the introduction of Lego clubs and Chess clubs in our branch network has also been a huge success. The art galleries in both Mountmellick and Abbeyleix remain very popular venues for hosting art, cultural and educational exhibitions with over 30 artists/groups showcasing their work in these venues.

The public libraries offer more than just books and have wide ranging services in all branches: these include audio books, DVDS, music, online resources, daily newspapers and magazines, free events and clubs, printing, photocopying, scanning facilities, free WIFI for members and broadband internet services at very reasonable rates. Modern libraries offer a rich cultural and educational environment that provides a space and access for those wishing to enrich their day to day lives.

### Service Development

In keeping with the national strategy for libraries “Opportunities for All”, a number of initiatives advanced in 2017, particularly the shared Library Management System, Sierra. The LMS was installed in libraries nationwide and enables members of Laois County Library Service to borrow or return items from any library throughout the country. Members can request stock from other counties and collect it at their local branch library free of charge.

Under the Strategy, free membership is available to all citizens in Laois and they can also avail of free e-books and e-resources via [www.laois.ie](http://www.laois.ie)

### Library Headquarters and Local History

Library Headquarters moved from Áras an Chontae to office space in the Old Mill, Portlaoise in February 2017. This refurbished space houses the local history material and provides researchers with a comfortable area to undertake their studies. There are almost 4,000 volumes housed in this section consisting of books, journals, newspapers, photographs, maps, slides, microfiche and microfilm. This appeals to a wide range of visitors ranging from students to people researching their local area, Americans and Australians searching for their Laois roots, local historians and others availing of primary source material for future publications and works. Staff continue to improve and add extra content to the local history website [www.askaboutireland.ie](http://www.askaboutireland.ie) including narratives about Laois, the local customs and the folklore of the county. Further information can be found on the library webpage <http://www.laois.ie/departments/libraries/services/local-research/local-studies/>

### Portlaoise New Library- Shaws Site Main Street

In 2016, Laois County Council was allocated €1.65 million of a capital grant towards the cost of a new county library for Portlaoise under the Department of the Housing, Planning and Local Government's Capital Funding Programme for Public Libraries. Located strategically in the heart of Portlaoise, the Shaws building at Lower Main Street is the site acquired for this proposed development. In July of 2017, Laois County Council granted Part VIII planning permission for the project and subsequently conducted an archaeological investigation on the back car park owing to the proximity of the original Fort wall of Maryborough which dates back to 1600. McCarthy O'Hora Associates have been appointed as Architects for the project which will now move forward to detailed planning and design stage. When the project is completed, the library will improve accessibility to all services for the entire community.

### Events and Activities

In 2017, Laois County Libraries held a large variety of events and activities in all Branch Libraries throughout the county and children and adults enjoyed the numerous events and activities organised. This year's programme was exceptional with author visits, art launches and exhibitions, music recitals, book clubs, Lego clubs, chess clubs, computer classes and storytelling.

The highlights of the year include Bealtaine, Seachtain na Gaeilge, Heritage Week, Summer Reading

Challenge and Children's Book Festival.

### Summer Reading Challenge

In 2017, the Library Service participated in the national Summer Reading initiative supported by the LGMA Libraries Development Unit. The "Summer Stars" programme was funded by Laois County Council with a total cost in excess of €4,500 spent to promote literacy development and encourage non readers to engage with books. Each year this event goes from strength to strength and in 2017, more than 1200 children received medals for completing the challenge.

### Creative Ireland

Creative Ireland has strengthened the county Library programme by supporting children's activities and promoting STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) events in libraries. These include planned workshops for Science Week and monthly events that promote numeracy and learning skills such as computer classes, chess clubs and Lego workshops. Free cultural events have been held in all Laois libraries throughout 2017; these comprised of art and craft classes, author visits and plays.

### Mountrath Library

Mountrath Library had another very successful summer programme hosting a wide variety of events. Children were invited to paint and decorate their own fairy doors, make beaded bracelets, participate in themed art and crafts sessions and also enjoy a magic science show. The sessions were fully booked and feedback from all was extremely positive. Heritage week was also a huge success with great attendance at both Juanita Browne's talk "An Introduction to Irish Wildlife" and Dr. Arnold Horner lecturer "Mountrath town through maps".

Children's Book Festival brought much excitement to the library and highlights included author visits by Alan Early, ER Murray and Emer Conlon. They discussed their books and fielded questions from the 116 children in attendance from local schools. At Halloween and Christmas children's activities included: Spooky Cookie Decorating, Treasure Hunts, Storytime and Reindeer Crafts. These catered for children of all ages as demand for seasonal crafts continues to increase. During the year classes from Scoil Bhríde N.S., St. Fintan's Boys, Castletown N.S., all came to the library as did LCA Students from Mountrath Community School. Adult groups continued to meet regularly at the library: the Knitting Group met every Friday morn-

ing from 10.30am - 1.00pm; the Adult Writer's group met once a month (1st Wednesday) at 11am; the Adult Book club met (1st Thursday of the month) at 6.15pm; the Local Historical Group met (2nd Thursday of the month) at 6.15pm; the Ciorcail Comhra (Irish Conversation Group) met (3rd Thursday of the month) at 6.15pm, and the Adult Colouring (mindfulness) group met (2nd & 4th Wednesday of the month at 11am).

### Abbeyleix Library

Abbeyleix Library continues to hold weekly chess classes for children and monthly art classes. The Art Gallery, with its impressive road frontage, continues to be a premier location in the county for art exhibitions. The Adult Knitting club is still a huge success while the Children's Chess Club has gone from strength to strength. The Lego Club established in 2016 has grown in popularity and culminated this year with a Lego Building Competition. Over 70 competitors took part with 67 different entries and there was a massive turn out on the day. The quality of entries was phenomenal and not an easy task for judges Jessica and Faolán Farrell, who competed on Channel 4's Lego Masters show.

Once again, summer in the library was a hive of activity as record breaking numbers of children signed up for the 'Summer Reading Challenge'. Building on its success from previous years, the library played host to a 'Mario Makers Club' during the summer months which continues to be a huge hit with children throughout the County. The library scored a major coup in October for Children's book festival with a visit from Shane Hegarty, author of the 'Darkmouth' series, the first book of which will be hitting the big screen early 2019. All of this activity, coupled with regular class visits from local schools and 2nd level students availing of study facilities, ensures that Abbeyleix Library remains an integral part of the community.

### Portlaoise Library

Portlaoise Library continues to be an important hub in a growing community providing a full schedule of clubs and events along with book and media loans, study space and busy IT facilities. The Classic Film Club has grown in popularity while 2017 saw the introduction of a Children's Chess Club attract great interest. Both the Summer Reading Challenge and Children's Book Festival brought huge excitement to the library with visits from authors such as Judi Curtin, Shane Hegarty and Alan Nolan discussing their books and writing style with visiting children. Numerous art and crafts sessions, book clubs and mindfulness

colouring events took place for adults and children alike throughout the year. However the highlight of 2017 had to be the 20th anniversary celebrations of the publication of "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone". The Library was transformed into Hogwarts for an evening in June where children selected wands in Olivanders, brewed up potions with Tonks and had their photos captured in Azkaban. Professor McGonagall sorted all the children into their houses before they went to Dumbledore's office to hear staff read some favourite snippets of the book. Prizes were awarded for the best costume on the night and also for memories placed in the pensieve. It was a truly magical evening for young and old Harry Potter fans.

### Mountmellick Library

Mountmellick library had another exciting year with a large number of events taking place for both adult and children alike. Popularity of ongoing events continues to grow especially the Book clubs, Adult Colouring Groups, Crafty Angels Crocheters, Art Gallery launches, Storytime and Quick crafts for Kids.

The Harry Potter celebrations proved to be a great success with people traveling from all over the county to take part in wand making workshops and themed quizzes. Dr. Jane Suzanne Carroll, Assistant Professor of Children's Literature at Trinity College Dublin gave a public lecture to an extremely enthusiastic audience about "The Word and the Wand: The Magic of Harry Potter". Over 70 people attended the event on the night where the questions and various fan theories were discussed at length. August was an extremely busy month with numerous events being held in conjunction with Creative Ireland and Heritage Week. Dolores Dempsey demonstrated the skill associated with Mountmellick Embroidery and Tom Joyce gave a painting demonstration to art enthusiasts. Children enjoyed the Living History workshops and also a visit from some interesting creatures that are normally housed in the Reptile Zoo, Kilkenny.

Once again, the Summer Reading Challenge proved to be a great success this year as was Children's Book Festival. Finally 2017 finished up with a visit from Santa Claus, Christmas Crafts and storytelling.

### Portarlinton Library

2017 was a busy year for Portarlinton Library as it cemented its position in the heart of the community. Regular events such as the Knitting Club, Adult Colouring and the Classics Book Club have continued with ever increasing success. February was a special month as the library celebrated its 1st birthday since

reopening; entertainment was provided by puppeteer, Julie-Rose McCormick with over 100 children in attendance for the festivities. To celebrate the 200th anniversary of the death of Jane Austen, the library held a seminar over a period of 3 weeks in June introducing people to her works, the fashion and the etiquette of her time. The summer months were also action-packed with a vast array of events taking place for both children and adults alike. Computer Classes, Art Classes and Heritage talks were greatly attended and the Summer Reading Challenge proved to be a massive success with 110 children awarded medals for completion. People also flocked to the library during Heritage week for a little bit of 80s nostalgia and perhaps the chance to head “Back to the Future” as the DeLorean motorcar was displayed in all its glory. Once again, author visits were an important feature of the library’s literary calendar with Emer Conlon and Shane Hegarty visiting in October for Children’s Book Festival while Alan Nolan chatted to children about his book “Sam Hannigan’s Woof Week” as part of the Leaves Literary Festival in November. The year ended just as hectic as it started with Christmas crafts, wreath making and storytelling sessions topping off December.

**EU Direct Centre in Mountmellick Library**

Mountmellick library continued as one of 8 EU Direct (EDIC) Information Centres in the Country. The information Centre which is based in the public area of the library acts as a one stop shop for people who want to get information regarding EU policies, information or citizens rights. It also hosts EU events and related activities and in 2017 held almost 30 EU themed events and talks promoting the centre and Europe.

**WIFI**

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

**BOOKFUND**

The Bookfund for 2017 was €75,000

**Performance Indicators 2016**

**Library Visits**

No. of library visits per head of population	3.09
No. of items issued to borrowers in the year	248,035

**Cost per Capita**

22.54

**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 Laois Heritage plan is supported by Laois County Council and the Heritage Council. It 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 which were delivered in 2017**

The following information relates to projects from the Laois Heritage Plan undertaken with the support of the Heritage Council in 2017.

1. Increase understanding of the heritage of Laois

During 2017, 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.

### Heritage Awareness Events

In addition to the programme of commemoration, events held during 2017 to raise awareness of heritage issues included:

- A week-long programme of over 70 family events, guided walks, talks, slideshows and fun days was organised 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;
- Science Week in November was very successful with a range of events and public talks. Schools workshops were held in Portlaoise, Mountrath and Timahoe, with schools from Durrow attending a science workshop day at Durrow Library. The events were supported by Discover Science and Engineering and the Heritage Council, and delivered as part of the Midlands Science Festival.
- The James Fintan Lalor School took place at the Midlands Park Hotel, Portlaoise in November 2017 and was very successful. The event was run this year by Laois Heritage Society with support from Laois County Council. All aspects of the event were well received by the public, press and all speakers etc involved.

### 2. Record the Heritage of Laois

Gathering and dissemination of data on aspects of the heritage of the county is a necessary first step in the conservation and highlighting of this heritage. In 2017, one data gathering project was carried out as follows:

#### Conservation Project

A Heritage Council funded project was carried out to document in detail all of the over 900 Protected Structures in Laois, creating a working archive that can be used to protect and conserve these structures into the

future.

Progress continued in 2017 on the Fort Protector Conservation Plan, a partnership project with Laois Heritage Society and the Heritage Council. In 2017, a full measured survey of the fort as undertaken, detailing all the remaining sections of the late medieval Fort wall. It is intended that the plan will be completed and implemented in the coming years, subject to availability of funding.

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

#### St Peter's Old Graveyard

A major programme of conservation works at Old St Peter's Graveyard in Portlaoise commenced in 2017 with conservation of stonework, the restoration of the wrought iron entrance gate and management of vegetation on site. It is planned that this work will continue in the coming years with the eventual opening of the site to the public as a "pocket park".

#### Ballyroan Schoolhouse

Stage I of a project to conserve Ballyroan Schoolhouse was undertaken in partnership with Ballyroan Development Association. The old one-room schoolhouse was repaired and conserved, and funding from the Town and Village Renewal Scheme was sourced for Stage II, which will see the construction of a small extension containing modern services and a new fully-accessible entrance to the building, making it accessible to all sections of the community.

#### Fort of Maryborough

Stage II of a conservation management plan was commissioned by Laois Heritage Society for this site in 2016, with funding from Laois County Council and the Heritage Council.

#### 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. This will continue in 2018.

### 4. Promote community participation in heritage plans and projects

#### Connecting Communities with Heritage Project

This project involved connecting local people with

their very local heritage, across three strands:

- Tidy Towns and Pollinators. Training and networking sessions were held for Tidy Towns groups to raise awareness of the Pollinator Plan and support was given to the special pollinator award in the national Tidy Towns Competition.
- Mapping Laois – Research continued on the new book on the historic maps of Laois, which will be published in 2018.
- Commemoration
  - WWI: A commemorative event was held to unveil a monument to the memory of Sgt Jack Moyney, who won a Victoria Cross for bravery in World War I. The event was held in Rathdowney in September 2017.
  - William Dargan: A plaque, information panels and commemorative garden were opened at Portlaoise Railway Station to commemorate Laois-born William Dargan, railway engineer who designed many of Ireland’s railways.

5. Promote enjoyment and accessibility of heritage

Creative Ireland & Pollinators

A project was undertaken as part of the Creative Ireland Programme to raise awareness of pollinators in Laois. A new music piece was commissioned and written in association with communities in the county. The piece by Ian Wilson was premiered during the Leaves Festival in Emo Court in November, with the performance by Saxophonist Cathal Roche to accompany the recorded score of the voices of Laois people and natural sounds of the county. As part of this event a Pollinator Poetry Prize was unveiled, with entries of outstanding quality from adults and young people across the midlands.

Landscape Forum

The National Landscape Forum was hosted in Abbeyleix in June 2017, bringing together a range of experts and community representatives from across the country, to discuss the value and importance of our landscapes. The conference involved field trips to Abbeyleix bog, Abbeyleix town and Heywood gardens to explore various wild, urban and planned landscape types.

CONSERVATION (PART)

Grant aid for Protected Structures

In 2017, two grants schemes for owners of historic properties were run with funding from the Department of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht Affairs.

The Built Heritage Investment scheme provides funding for maintenance of protected structures. Laois County Council administered the scheme in 2017. Funding was allocated to thirteen historic properties, to a total of €96,890. One of the functions of the scheme is to leverage private funding to be spent on historic buildings and traditional skills. In 2017, the total estimated privately leveraged funding was €229,000.

The Structures at Risk fund is for buildings in imminent danger of significant deterioration. A maximum of two structures per county were grant aided. Two protected structures in Laois received funding for urgent conservation work to a total of €46,000. These schemes are managed by the Heritage Office.

**Transportation, Environment & Emergency Services Strategic Policy Committee**

**Director of Services:** Donal Brennan  
Kieran Kehoe

**Chairperson:** Seamus McDonald, 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)
Jerry Lodge, M.C.C.(R.I.P.)	Kitty Creighton (Environment/ Conservation) Ger Mulhall (Business/ Commercial)

**ROADS**

**Senior Engineer:** Philip McVeigh, Roads

In 2017, the Roads Department received roads grants and budget funding of c.€15.5 million. This comprised funding from a number of sources including the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS), Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII, formerly National Roads Authority) and Laois County Council’s own resources in revenue and capital funding to advance maintenance and capital projects throughout the county. This included €812,000 of funding, in two tranches, by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS) for Local Improvement Schemes.

Roads Area staff supported by Road Design carried out pavement strengthening and surface dressing of regional and local roads under the roads programme. 21.5 km of our network was strengthened while 21.2 km of road was surface dressed. This in total represented approximately 2% of the total road network in the County.

**Graiguercullen-Portarlington Municipal District (Eastern Area)**

In the Eastern Area, a total road surfacing length of 8.2km was completed by Restoration Improvements Works (Strengthening).

A total road surfacing length of 8.5km was also completed by Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing).

Bridge rehabilitation/repair works were carried out on several bridges, most notably–

Coolhenry Bridge, Ballickmoyler - General Masonry Repairs and River Bank Reinstatement Works:

Killeen Bridge, Crettyard involving Large Embankment and Drainage Construction

Safety Improvement Works were completed at Barrow House Crossroads. These works included verge realignment, boundary wall construction and accommodation works.

Under the Towns & Villages Renewal Scheme, civil works for the undergrounding of overhead cables on Main Street and Market Square in Portarlington were completed. These works included footpath and street reinstatement works.

Significant Barrow Drainage works were completed in 2017, including vegetation and silt removal from approximately 3 kilometres of the River Barrow between Dunrally Bridge and its confluence with the Stradbally River.

Under the footpath programme, footpath works were completed in Stradbally: on Main Street, Stradbally where approximately 260m of footway reconstruction works were completed and at Hunter’s Lane, Stradbally where approximately 110m of footway reconstruction works were completed.

Under the Local Improvement Schemes, 2 schemes in Boley and Woodbrook were completed.

At the Community Centre Portarlington, construction works on an overflow carpark commenced to facilitate the increased demand on existing car park spaces.

**Portlaoise Municipal District (Central Area)**

In the Central Area, a total road surfacing length of 4.6km was completed by Restoration Improvements Works (Strengthening).

A total road surfacing length of 5.2km completed by Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing).

### Town Renewal Portlaoise

In conjunction with the Vision Statement for Portlaoise Public Realm Strategy/Vision Statement, Laois County Council have commenced setting up the structures and mechanisms outlined in the “Framework for Town Centre Renewal” published by the Retail Consultation Forum. The framework recognises that genuine partnership amongst key stakeholders is a prerequisite for success. Towns can often have a number of different community groups, business groups and public representatives. Bringing these groups together through a Steering Group or Town Team that is representative of all stakeholders in the town is key to developing a vision for the town and setting out a plan that has the support of all sectors of the community.

A Town Centre Management Partnership (Town Team) for Portlaoise was established in Q4 2017. It is intended that this group will ensure stakeholder engagement, carry out a 12 point “Health Check” on Portlaoise town with a view to preparing and implementing a Town Centre Plan.

### River Nore – Removal of vegetation, deadwood and debris

In its examination of the River Nore channel in South Laois, the Portlaoise Municipal District Office concluded that deadwood/debris within the watercourse and overhanging trees on the river banks are contributing to upstream flooding. The Portlaoise Municipal District Office, in conjunction with the South Laois Drainage Group, applied for and obtained funding from the Office of Public Works (OPW) to carry out works on the River Nore in South Laois.

Laois County Council commenced these remediation works in Q4 2017. The works involved the removal of deadwood/debris from the river channel and pruning of bankside trees that were causing restrictions to water flow. In November 2017, Wes Wilkinson, Senior Executive Engineer, Portlaoise Municipal District was presented with a Community Award from the Irish National Floods Forum for his work in relation to engaging with the various state bodies and local community groups in relation to the project.

### Footpath Programme

Over €110,000 of footpath works were carried out in the towns of Portlaoise, Abbeyleix and Ballyroan in 2017



### Portlaoise Town Planting

The Portlaoise Municipal District maintains containers and beds at over 100 locations around Portlaoise Town. These locations are planted with winter bedding in November and with summer bedding in May each year.



The Portlaoise MD Office also works closely with Portlaoise Tidy Towns with the planting and maintenance of over 120 hanging baskets in the Main Street and Lyster Square in the town. The hanging baskets are on display from June to October each year.

### Borris-in-Ossory/Mountmellick Municipal District (Western Area)

In the Western Area, a total road surfacing length of 8.8km was completed by Restoration Improvements Works (Strengthening).

A total road surfacing length of 7.5km was completed by Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing).

Significant drainage works were completed at Roundwood. These works included box culvert replacement, road surface reinstatement and fencing works.

### Footpath Programme

On the R445 in Mountrath (Portlaoise Road) a new footpath was constructed. The works included new drainage and a grass verge on the approach to Mountrath town. The completed works provided improved safety and enhancement to the area.

### Bridge Rehabilitation Works

Several parapet walls on bridges were repaired using traditional masonry. Kyle Bridge is shown below:



### Safety Improvement Works

Road safety improvement works were carried out at Coolrain. The works involved the realignment of a dangerous bend and associated drainage works

### Towns and Village Renewal

Under the Towns and Villages Renewal Scheme, new sandstone parapet walls were constructed in Mountrath. These works provided improved safety and also enhanced the area. In Mountmellick, a new boundary wall/railing was constructed at the Old Mill in Irish town, adjacent to the N80.

### Road Design Office

Safety Improvement Schemes were progressed at seven sites across the county: Cromoge, Ballypickas, Barrowhouse, Clonmeen South, Clonmeen North, Spink and Ballybrophy. Funding of €150k was provided by the DTTaS for these schemes. Works varied across the sites but included enhancements to signage and line markings as well as pavement works together with installation of bollards, splitter islands,

public lighting, and junction improvement works.



In addition Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) HD15 Safety schemes were carried out at 3 sites located on the N80 at Geashill, Mountmellick and Nyra. Works carried across the sites included new nearside passing bays, junction improvement works, construction of new footpaths and upgrade of signage and public lighting.

### Pavement Surfacing

Laois County Council and Kildare National Roads Office progressed surfacing works for 2.2km of the N80 at Dysart and 3.4km of the N80 at Upper Forest under the PARR schemes funded by TII.



National Secondary resurfacing schemes to specifically enhance the skidding resistance of the road pavement were also carried out in 2017. Eight sites (HD28 sites) on the N80 and N77 had skid resistance improvement works through mechanical abrasion. A further four sites were resurfaced on the N80, N77 and N78 to improve skid resistance. Funding was provided by TII and the total length of road resurfaced was approximately 1km.

A new pedestrian crossing was installed at Summerhill in Portlaoise to facilitate the opening of a new school in Summerhill.

### Public Lighting

Public Lighting upgrades to LED lanterns were carried out on 160 lights in various locations throughout the county on the N80 and N78. These upgrades were funded by TII at a cost of approximately €188k. Maintenance works also continued on the stock of over 8,000 public lights across the county

### Speed Limit review

The public consultation on the Draft Speed Limit Byelaws concluded on the 21st August 2017. There were several locations on national secondary routes where the proposed changes needed to be discussed further with the TII. It is expected that proposals will be presented to the Elected Members at Municipal District meetings in early 2018 and subsequently presented to the full Council.

### Winter Maintenance

Call-out operations were carried out on 47 occasions during the 2016/2017 winter season treating 458km of the salted network in Laois. At the start of the 2017/2018 season in October 2017, an additional 2.2% or 10km was added to the treated network taking the distances salted to approximately 468km. This was achieved by route optimisation of treated lengths.

### Portlaoise Southern Circular Route Extension

Department approval to publish the CPO was received on 15th June 2017. The CPO was made on 22nd June and published on 27th June. Following An Bord Pleanála (ABP) approval, the CE Order confirming the CPO was made on 2nd October. Notification of confirmation issued to all landowners and notice was published on 10th October. The Notice to Treat was issued to each landowner in early January 2018.

An open evening was held in Portlaoise to give the public an opportunity to review and discuss the proposals. Meetings were also held with the individual landowners impacted by the project and the land acquisition process subsequently commenced.

Tender documents were completed by Laois County Council's consulting engineers and were submitted to the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport in December 2017, for approval to proceed to tender. The

Prior Information Notice (PIN) was published in the Supplement to the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) on the 10th November. Subject to Department approval, it is expected that this scheme could proceed to contract award/construction stage in Q2-2018.

### N80 Maidenhead Realignment Scheme

The Kildare National Roads Office have prepared the final draft of the contract documents for the scheme. TII have requested a summary review of the documents before issuing for tender. When this review is completed and recommendations have been incorporated, TII approval will be sought to publish the tender for the main Scheme. Procurement of an archaeological services contract also progressed in 2017 and is scheduled to start on site in February 2018 with completion around June 2018.

The main Scheme is currently expected to issue for tender in May 2018 with contract award expected in Q4-2018. TII announced on 21st December 2017 their allocations for 2018 which included an allocation of €2,500,000 for the N80 Maidenhead Realignment Scheme.

### Storm Ophelia

On 16th October 2017, ex-hurricane Ophelia impacted the entire country. Laois County Council's Emergency Local Co-Ordination Group met several times in advance of the arrival of the storm which made landfall on Monday 16th October. Overall, there were 219 incidents recorded by Laois County Council's Call Centre involving trees down, roads blocked/partially blocked, ESB cables down, Eir cables down and debris on roads. At its peak, there were 37 recorded locations of roads blocked by trees/overhead lines with an estimated 80 trees down on public roadways.

Fire Service crews with roads crews assistance cleared all Priority 1 routes by Monday evening 16th October. Roads crews were on standby for the cleanup operation which commenced immediately on Tuesday morning 17th October. By mid-morning on 17th October, there were only 2 recorded road blockages. Ongoing debris clearance/monitoring was carried out by Area staff over the following days.

### Mountmellick Flooding

Serious flooding occurred in Mountmellick on 22nd November 2017 following an extremely intense rainfall event. Laois County Council assisted during the

event with roads crews and fire service crews working alongside Laois Civil Defence and the Army. There was significant damage to private dwellings and commercial premises. The Roads Department is currently preparing a submission to DTTaS for the costs of repairs to damaged infrastructure associated with the flooding in Mountmellick. Following discussions with the OPW, a Flood Relief Scheme is being progressed in conjunction with the OPW.

**Green Flag**

The Green Flag Award is an internationally recognised benchmark award established in 1997 in the UK. In 2008, it expanded into other countries. In 2015 it was introduced into Ireland on a pilot basis through An Taisce. Páirc an Phobail Portlaoise applied for the Green Flag Award in 2016 and successfully met all the criteria resulting in being awarded their first Green Flag for Parks. The Green Flag Award sets out to recognise, understand and promote biodiversity, landscapes and buildings. Well managed green spaces combine to provide a wide range of ecosystems, good practice in biodiversity management, horticultural and arboricultural management for wildlife sustainability. A green space needs to reflect and respond to the changing needs of its users, striving always to achieve a good level of management in all areas. In 2017, Páirc an Phobail was successful again in its application and on 21 July 2017 was awarded the Green Flag for Parks for the second year running.



**Road Safety**

Cycle training continues throughout the county in primary schools. The Drive for Life Program delivers a road safety and awareness program to secondary school students.

Twenty children took part in a one day cycle event during National Bike Week. This workshop was run in partnership with Knockmay After School Project,

Laois Sports Partnership and Laois Partnership.

Road Safety Officer visits continues in primary school to promote road safety education regarding general road safety issues.

Site inspections took place at schools, following concerns raised by Principals, teachers, parents and members of the public.

Hi-visibility vests, arm bands, stickers and school bag danglers were distributed to children during school visits and to various organisations during the year, including cycle clubs, playschools, scouts and girl guides.

**School Warden**

The opening of the Holy Family school resulted in the relocation of two school wardens to serve the new campus.

**Performance Indicators 2016**

Percentage (based on length) of both regional and local roads whose PSCI condition has been recorded as at 31/12/2015

	Regional	Local
Overall%	100%	100%

**Ratings in Pavement Surface Condition Index**

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

Road Class	1-4	5-6	7-8	9-10
Regional	11%	29%	32%	26%
Local Primary	14%	32%	28%	7%
Local Secondary	14%	32%	27%	6%
Local Tertiary	14%	20%	17%	11%

**ENVIRONMENT**

**Director:** Donal Brennan

**Senior Engineer:** Michael O’Hora

**Litter Management**

Laois County Council issued 189 litter fines in 2017, including 49 fines detected using CCTV at five Bring Banks – County Hall, Portlaoise, Ballinakill, Mountmellick, Newtown and Mountrath and on the M7 Motorway.

**Clean up Laois Week**

Our largest and longest running annual anti litter initiative, Clean Up Laois week was held in April 2017 in association with our sponsor, AES.



Clean up Laois Week, run in conjunction with An Taisce’s National Spring Clean, represents a partnership approach to tackling the ongoing litter problem. It plays a vital role in improving the quality of life by empowering people to take responsibility for and have pride in, their local areas. Approximately 111 groups registered last year and in excess of 900 volunteers took part in the initiative, which resulted in a total of 32.22 tonnes of waste being collected.

During the year the Council also appointed a contractor to clean up a number of major litter/waste black spots around the county, including bog areas and approximately 67 tonnes of waste was disposed of.

**Portlaoise Public Tipping Area and Recycling Facility**

The public tipping area on the landfill site was relocated to a newly constructed area adjacent to the weighbridge. The new facility in addition to being aesthetically more pleasing, also provides additional safety for the public. The weighbridge office was replaced with a new structure and the weighbridge soft-

ware and payment system was upgraded. New contracts for the operation of the public tipping area and the two civic amenity sites were also tendered and awarded.

**Bring Banks**

In 2017, the bottle banks at all 45 locations were updated and new purpose built units were installed at existing sites and at a number of new locations across the county. The new banks, with at least twice the capacity of the old banks are neat, attractive and have good signage to assist the public with their recycling of cans/glass etc.



**Community Grant Schemes**

Under the Community Grant Scheme 2017, funding was awarded to 76 groups for projects to benefit the environment and enhance local amenities.

**Environmental Awareness & Community Initiatives**

During 2017, Laois County Council assisted Abbeyleix Tidy Towns with their entry in the Entente Florale Europe competition. Abbeyleix was one of two Irish locations chosen to represent Ireland.



Activities were put in place and a work programme was identified and delivered over a 7 months period.

European adjudicators visited and judged Abbeyleix in July and the awards were presented in Slovenia in September. Abbeyleix was only one of two European entries to receive two awards – Silver Award and President’s Prize for Biodiversity for Abbeyleix Bog. It was a great achievement for the community as well as an excellent opportunity for Laois to be represented on the European stage.

Additional supports (e.g. grants, workshops and training) are offered throughout the year to schools and other community groups, including Tidy Towns. Such supports complement national awareness initiatives which are tailored for a local delivery.

**Waste Enforcement**

The Waste Enforcement Section is committed to maintaining and improving the high quality environment it has provided 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 working closely with colleagues in the Planning Enforcement Section. In 2017, 154 waste related complaints were successfully dealt with.

The Waste Enforcement Section is responsible for reviewing and issuing new Waste Facility Permits and Certificate of Registrations. In 2017, 19 Waste Facility Permits and certificates of Registration were registered in County Laois.

**Midlands Energy Agency**

**Overview of Energy Usage in 2017**

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 2017 on Public Sector Energy Efficiency Performance reports that Laois County Council made a 30.8% saving by the end of 2016 against their 33% target by 2020.

**Actions Undertaken in 2017**

Midland Energy Agency undertook a range of actions to promote energy efficiency throughout the region:

- Appointed Carlow Kilkenny Energy Agency CKEA as energy advisors
- Completed a program of 39 building energy audits to SI426 standard supported by SEAI

Project Assistance program.

- Participated in Better Energy Communities (BEC) program 2017 with energy upgrade projects in fire stations and LED public Lighting as well as supporting community projects with capital cost of €1m and €373k grant funding

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

- Replaced 119 lanterns with LED’s in Port Laoise Plaza and Kilminchy area under the Better Energy Communities (BEC) program 2017 saving 36,000kWh pa.
- TII supported an energy efficient upgrade in the public lighting on the N80. 158 lights were replaced with energy efficient LEDs’s at a cost of €197,350 resulting in energy savings of 93,243kWh pa. (54%)
- Installed new heaters in Rathdowney Library and energy efficient drying equipment in Port Laoise Fire Station under BEC2017.
- CLAR funding was used to support lighting upgrades in schools and community facilities at 11 locations around the County and allowed for the upgrading of 46 lights to energy efficient LED’s again allowing savings of up to 50%.
- Participated in the OPW Optimising Power @Work Program at County Hall. Gas & electricity meters have been installed to monitor energy usage and an ongoing energy awareness program is running.

**Performance Indicators 2016**

No. of households availing of a 3 bin service at 31/12/2016	4,832
% of households availing of a 3 bin service	16.66
Total No. of Pollution cases that were the subject of a complaint during 2016	856
Total No. of Pollution cases closed during 2016	831
Total No. of Pollution cases on hand at 31/12/2016	32
<b>% Local Authority Area within the 5 Levels of Litter Pollution</b>	
% area unpolluted or litter free	14

% area slightly polluted	86
% area moderately polluted	0
% area significantly polluted	0
% area grossly polluted	0

**WATER SERVICES**

Senior Engineer: Michael O’Hora, Water Services

**Rural Water Multi Annual Programme 2016 - 2018**

The objectives of the Multi Annual Programme 2016-2018 are:

- To provide enhanced funding certainty for priority investment needs.
- To support the implementation of proper planning and sustainable development of rural areas, to meet the requirements of the Drinking Water Directive in relation to rural water supplies.
- To support the delivery of measures identified in the River Basin Management Plans to meet the objectives of the Water Framework Directive.

Funding was provided and works were carried out in 2017 in the following categories:

**Environmental and Public Health Compliance in the Group Water Sector**

Completion of the nitrates treatment installation by Cullohill GWS. Other water treatment works were carried out by Garryhedder GWS, Barrowhouse GWS, Attanagh GWS and Ballybuggy GWS .

New meters were installed by Ballymaddock GWS under the Rationalisation and Amalgamation measure to allow for future amalgamation with Ballypickas GWS.

**Enhancement of existing Group Schemes**

Network upgrade works were carried out by a number of Group Schemes under this category, including Ballacolla GWS, Ballypickas GWS, Errill GWS, Attanagh GWS, Heath GWS, and Moyadd GWS.

Grants to fund capital replacement costs were paid to Ballacolla, Ballypickas and Donaghmore group schemes

**Rural Development in the group water sector**

Laois County Council staff are currently investigating options to supply water to a proposed new group water scheme at Knock, Spink.

**Transition of schemes to public water and waste water sector**

Pallas Big GWS and The Island GWS were taken over by Irish Water on 1st August 2017.

Works were completed on Phase 111 of the upgrade of the Clonkeen Fermoy GWS in early 2017.

**Innovation and Research**

Weather Stations were presented to Ballacolla, Clough and Shanahoe national schools during the year by Ballacolla GWS to raise awareness about water, it’s importance, the importance of the local Group Water Scheme and the importance of protecting the water.

The schools visited the reservoir and pumping station and were given facts and technical details on the production and distribution of water to the members of the Ballacolla GWS. They were also given a demonstration on how to scour the water network.

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 the EU drinking water quality standards and also to reduce energy and operating costs.

The total expenditure on the Rural Water Programme for 2017 was €514,093 with €347,439 processed in subsidies to Group Water Schemes. A total of €80,206 was paid to 41 no. applicants for the provision of new or for upgrade works to their domestic wells. In addition, €13,448 was paid to 4 no. applicants in respect of works to upgrade their domestic waste water treatment systems and €5,272 was paid to 2 no. applicants in respect of works to replace lead piping in their domestic water systems.

The National Rural Water Review Group (NRWRG) was set up to carry out a review of the local authority service delivery for rural water. Laois County Council was selected as the Lead Authority with members drawn from the Department, NFGWS and a number of local authorities across the country. The purpose of this project is to identify a number of models that will achieve efficiencies and improved service delivery to the Rural Water Sector. Following the submission and

approval of the Project Initiation the preparation of a Business Case commenced towards identifying a preferred model for delivery of rural water services. This is due for completion in early 2018.

### Dangerous Structures and Places

A Register of Dangerous Structures & Places is maintained in the Water Services Section. There are 25 open files on this register at 31st December 2017.

### Water Services Laboratory

Laois County Council's Water Services Laboratory enhanced its INAB accreditation by adding two more parameters to the existing list of parameters during 2017.

### 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 2017 to implement the South Eastern River Basin District and Shannon International River Basin District Management Plans 2009-2015. The Council collected 415 river water samples for the EPA Surveillance and Operational monitoring programmes and took 129 investigative river water samples in 2017. A new plan is expected to be published in early 2018 and will replace the existing plan. Thirty-seven Nutrient Management Plans concerning the spreading of Sewage Sludge in the county were submitted to the Council for approval in 2017. The Council continued to monitor discharge licences to rivers and groundwaters under Section 4 of the Local Government (Water Pollution) Acts 1977 to 1990. A total of 32 samples were taken and analysed to ensure compliances with licences. Nine licences were operational in 2017 and one may commence in 2018.

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 23 inspections were carried out in 2017, as required by the Plan.

Laois County Council investigated all complaints received concerning water pollution in the County. Twenty-four water complaints were received in 2017. 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 2017. Twenty nine complaints were received and investigated in 2017 concerning air quality. The nature of these complaints included agricultural odour problems and smoke nuisance. Eighty four smoky coal inspections were carried out in 2017.

### Noise Pollution

Thirty six noise complaints were received in 2017. Some of these complaints were domestic in nature and in these cases the Council encourages neighbours to discuss the problem and to come to an agreed solution. Other complaints concerned commercial activities in the County.

### Climate Change Adaptation Strategy

A draft Climate Change Adaptation Plan was prepared for Laois County Council in 2017 and is currently undergoing internal review. The plan seeks to improve the resilience of the Council in providing services in the face of future climate risk.

### Irish Water - Capital Investment Programme

Irish Water continue to fund all Water Services Capital Projects. Works were completed on the Portarlington Water Supply upgrade - La Bergerie. Other works include the Laois Water Mains Rehab (Contract No. 2) and Portlaoise WWTP upgrade.

### National Service Indicators 2016

Drinking water in private schemes in compliance with statutory requirements	98.43%
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### LAOIS WATER SAFETY

#### Water Safety Awareness Week 2017

Laois County Council in conjunction with Laois Water Safety Area Committee delivered a number of key events to promote Water Safety Awareness in 2017. Schools & community group visits were conducted, whereby basic water safety awareness talks and ring buoy demonstrations were delivered.

Laois Water Safety successfully worked in conjunction with Vicarstown 'Beat the Barge' Canalfest in September 2017 and a range of water based activities were on offer. The events emphasised the importance

of wearing the appropriate lifejacket/buoyancy aid when participating in open water.



### WATER SAFETY CLASSES 2017

Laois Water Safety successfully delivered Spring and Autumn Water Safety Classes during 2017 at Portlaoise Leisure Centre. 150 adults & children participated in Irish Water Safety Classes throughout the year. Laois Water Safety held a very successful Water Safety Awards Night in Aras an Chontae in September 2017 with approx 100 participants in attendance to receive their Water Safety Certificates presented by An Cathaoirleach Pádraig Fleming.

### Paws Programme

Laois County Council in association with Laois Water Safety and Portlaoise Leisure Centre continued to successfully support and deliver the Primary Aquatic Water Safety Programme (PAWS). Primary schools were visited in County Laois in December where over 1,000 children were presented with PAWS Certificates after participating in the Programme.

### Ring Buoys

During 2017 Laois County Council continued to inspect, maintain, erect and replace ring buoys at open water locations countywide.

## LAOIS COUNTY FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

**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 626 emergency incidents consisting of 468 fires, 141 special service incidents and 17 false alarms. Laois County Fire and Rescue Service was heavily involved

with the responses to both Storm Ophelia in October & the flooding in Mountmellick and Portarlinton in November.

To enhance equipment standards the programme for replacement and updating of equipment was continued in 2017. New breathing apparatus sets, gas-tight chemical protective clothing, road traffic collision & specialist rescue equipment, thermal imaging camera, gas detectors and fire ground communications equipment were provided.

An extensive program of training for operational fire fighters was completed involving over 540 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 2017. In addition, the Health, Safety and Welfare Management Programme was approved by Senior Management and was reviewed 35 times throughout the year.

49 fire safety certificate applications and 92 licensing applications were received, with 79 planning applications also referred to the fire service during the year. 96 premises were inspected.

Extensive planning and liaison was carried out with the organisers of the Electric Picnic Music Festival in Stradbally (approx 58,000 attended) to ensure the safety of all involved. An extensive programme of inspections was put in place for this music festival.

The Fire Safety Primary Schools Programme was carried throughout the county between October and December 2017. All eight fire stations were involved. 64 primary schools were visited and fire safety advice/information was received by 2009 students.

The program for National Fire Safety Week was held in October. All fire stations held open nights which included presentations on fire safety attended by the public and groups from the local communities.

Laois County Fire & Rescue Service took part in the 2017 National Extrication and Trauma Challenge held in Co. Meath in May, winning the Trauma challenge once again. The Team consisting of D/M Paul Quail (Portlaoise) and D/M Bosco Lawlor (Abbeyleix) went on to represent Ireland at the World Challenge in Romania during August.

All Major Emergency Management facilities were maintained and all relevant plans, sub-plans and procedures were updated throughout the year.

Performance Indicators 2016

Cost per capita of the Fire Service

Cost per Capita	€41.89
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	5.21
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	5.24

Percentage of attendances at scenes

% of cases in respect of fire in which first attendance at the scene is within 10 minutes	38.10%
% of cases in respect of fire in which first attendance at the scene is after 10 minutes but within 20 minutes	52.38%
% of cases in respect of fire in which first attendance at the scene is after 20 minutes	9.52%
% of cases in respect of all other emergency incidents in which first attendance at the scene is within 10 minutes	35.91%
% of cases in respect of all other emergency incidents in which first attendance at the scene is after 10 minutes but within 20 minutes	44.75%
% of cases in respect of all other emergency incidents in which first attendance at the scene is after 20 minutes	19.34%



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 and is one of 8 counties providing drones for aerial search.
- **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, Mountmellick and Portlaoise. If you are interested in the above and are aged between 18-65, contact us to find out more information on (057)8664106, e-mail lpreston@laoiscoco.ie or visit our website at [www.laoiscivildefence.ie](http://www.laoiscivildefence.ie)

**Economic Development, Enterprise and Planning**

**Director of Services:** Kieran Kehoe

**Chairperson:** Mary Sweeney, M.C.C.

Members	Sectoral
John Moran, M.C.C	Harry Vanston (Farming Sector)
John Joe Fennelly, 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.	Noel Gavigan (Environment/ Conservation)

**ECONOMIC AND ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT**

2017 saw the official launch of Laois County Council's Business Support Unit, which comprises the Local Enterprise Office and the Economic Development Unit to form a centre point of contact for existing and prospective businesses.

One of the main objectives of the Business Support Unit is to attract and develop businesses to help build a strong and sustainable local economy. The Business Support Unit will nurture a pro-business environment which supports enterprise and promotes Laois nationally and globally as a location of choice for business and investment.

The official launch of the Business Support Unit was carried out at a ceremony by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Charlie Flanagan TD, in the presence of the Cathaoirleach of Laois County Council, Cllr Padraig Fleming and the Minister of State for Trade Employment Business EU Digital Single Market & Data Protection, Pat Breen TD.



The occasion also saw the launch of the Connect to Laois Marketing Strategy by the Chief Executive of

Laois County Council, John Mulholland. This new strategy, which is centred on the Connect to Laois website and brochure, highlights the advantages offered by Laois to prospective investors who are considering establishing a new business somewhere in Ireland.

Minister Pat Breen TD used the occasion of the launch of the Business Support Unit as an opportunity to meet a number of local Laois businesses to discuss the challenges faced by businesses and responses they would like to see the government introduce. The Minister started the day in a joint meeting with four LEO clients, Kelly Ging of Kelly Lou Cakes, Heidi Higgins of Heidi Higgins Design, Michael Onalami of Flavour Safari and Nikita O'Rourke of Fetch Your Pet Needs. This meeting focused in particular on the needs of smaller businesses and the self employed. He also visited Powerpoint Engineering, a former LEO client which has grown in size to employing 20 staff members and is now in Enterprise Ireland's portfolio. These meetings showcased the variety and vibrancy of businesses in Laois.

The highlight of 2017 was the Laois Business Awards held in April 2017. The inaugural Laois Business Awards took place in the Midlands Park Hotel on the 28th April with 28 nominees from around the county shortlisted across nine different categories. The awards were an opportunity to recognise and celebrate the strength and diversity of the business community in County Laois. Laois woman Louise Phelan, global Vice-President of Paypal, was one of the judges while RTE's Marty Whelan was MC on the night. Over 100 local business leaders attended the awards night with the top award of the night 'Laois Business of the Year' going to Killeen Civil Engineering, a family-run civil engineering company based in Portlaoise. Other awards on the night included:

**TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY AWARD**

- Coolanowle Country House, Organic B&B, Farmhouse & Self-Catering cottages set on 3 acres. Based near Arles.

**RETAIL EXCELLENCE AWARD**

- Breslin's Supervalu, Family run community supermarket in Rathdowney – emphasis on fresh food.

**INNOVATION IN BUSINESS**

- Cyc-lok Ltd, Designer/Producer of award-winning modular, access controlled bike lockers.

E-COMMERCE AWARD

- Kelly Lou Cakes, a custom bakery & café creating celebration cakes & sweet bakes in Portlaoise.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARD

- Killeen Civil Engineering, Family run civil engineering company based in Portlaoise.

EXPORTER OF THE YEAR

- Laois Sawmills Ltd, State of the art sawmill processing 100,000 tonnes of log material annually. Based in Ballymacken on the Stradbally Road, just outside Portlaoise.

SME BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

- G's Gourmet Jams, Producer of homemade jams, jellies, chutneys, marmalades and sauces from outside Abbeyleix.

AGRI BUSINESS AWARD

- Stradbally Farm Services, Private company dealing in importation and distribution of agricultural equipment.

ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR

- Aubrey Nuzum (Aubren Ltd), Design, build & delivery of air management products.



During the year Laois County Council were successful in securing funding under the REDZ Initiative from the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Rural Economic Development Zones (REDZ) have been identified as rural towns and their hinterlands which have potential for economic development through imaginative supports. Laois County Council supported 2 projects under this initiative in 2017:

Connect 2 Laois For Food - a unique networking, training and mentoring programme for small food and drinks producers in Laois, aimed at developing Laois as a centre of renown for the quality of its small producers. Over 30 local businesses participated in the programme.

Portarlington Fab Lab - A Fab Lab is a small scale innovation unit which allows creators have access to high tech equipment without the need to purchase it themselves. It will provide technical training to local young people and will allow innovators to rent equipment on a half day or full day basis. It is an exciting concept which will lead to a cluster of IT innovators using the facility, sharing ideas and working together in a structured programme of market led innovation, best practice transfer and product and service development.

Other key actions of the Business Support unit in 2017 were:

- Continued marketing of County Laois as a place to do business
- The promotion and development of Business Incentive Schemes
- Support to Durrow and Portarlington to participate in Bank of Ireland' National Enterprise Town Awards

2017 has been an extremely successful year for the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) in supporting local businesses through the provision of both financial and non-financial supports. A total of €346,211 in developmental grant aid was approved for 14 businesses with the potential to create 45 full time jobs.

An important part of LEO's work is the fostering of an enterprise culture within County Laois and encouraging people to consider entrepreneurship as a viable career option, no matter what stage in life they are at. The Student Enterprise Programme is active in engaging with secondary school students in schools all over Laois and yet again in 2017 LEO Laois had one of the highest entries in the country to Ireland's Best Young Entrepreneur of the Year. Over 500 local people participated in the 62 training courses delivered. LEO delivered a range of supports to help businesses prepare for Brexit through it's Trading Online Vouchers and Technical Support for Micro Exporters grants, assisting exporting companies to develop overseas markets as alternatives to Britain.

## LOCAL ENTERPRISE OFFICE HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2017

2017 saw the creation of 71 new jobs in 110 LEO support companies, a 92% increase on 2016. A total of €390,633 in development grant aid, Trading Online Vouchers and Technical assistance for Micro Export Grants was approved for 37 Laois businesses with the potential to create a further 74 new jobs.

LEO continued to provide small businesses with the necessary skills and information to assist them in their development and growth through various supports as follows:

### Business Training

A total of 62 training courses were on offer through LEO in 2017 with a total of 534 persons participating. Of the persons trained during the year, a total of 245(46%) were male and 289 (54%) female.

LEO ran 10 Start Your Own Business courses with 101 participants in 2017 which provided vital information and training to those considering entering the field of entrepreneurship.

### Female Entrepreneurship

One of the priorities of Local Enterprise Office Laois is providing supports to build female lead businesses. As part of this focus the LEO developed and supported the Laois Enterprising Women's Network for a number of years as a means of providing local businesswomen with the opportunity to network with their contemporaries. In 2017 the Local Enterprise Office signed an agreement with Network Ireland, the national organisation for women in business. This new agreement sees the Laois Enterprising Women's Network become the Laois branch of Network Ireland and gives Laois businesswomen access to a nationwide business network where they can exchange ideas, increase business contacts and network with likeminded people. The new partnership has been extremely successful in its first year and has seen monthly scheduled meetings as well as a well attended Christmas social event.

### Student Enterprise Awards

Every year in Ireland, almost 15,000 second level students get to find out what it is like to be their own boss and run their own business by taking part in the Student Enterprise Awards. As part of this programme, students learn what it is really like to set up and run their own business. They use their skills to secure resources they need to make this happen, and with the

help of their teachers learn how to create a viable business opportunity.

In 2017 Laois students again rose to the challenge of setting up and operating their own companies. 329 students, representing over 60 mini-companies from 7 Laois secondary schools entered the 2017 competition. Following judging 35 mini-companies were selected to participate in the Laois county final on March 8th.

The winning project was SenseAbility, a business founded by 4 students in Heywood Community School, who created sensory blankets as an aid to people with dementia and autism. The 4 Heywood students represented Laois admirably in the National Final which was held in Croke Park on May 3rd.

### 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. 171 clients received one-to-one mentoring in 2017, a significant increase on 2016.

### Micro Finance Ireland

Under a partnership between Microfinance Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices, business loans are available through the Local Enterprise Office. 8 businesses applied for funding under this programme in 2017, with 5 being approved.

### Ireland's Best Young Entrepreneur

2017 saw another fantastic level of entries into the Laois rounds of Ireland's Best Young Entrepreneur of the Year 2018. 71 local entrepreneurs, aged 35 or under, submitted their businesses and business ideas. This was the 5th highest level of entry in the country. Each of the entrants was hoping to share in the €50,000 investment fund which was available to the category winners and runners-up in Laois. They were inspired by the success of Kelly Ging, from Kelly Lou Cakes, who reached the National Final in the 2017 competition, becoming the first ever competitor from Laois to reach this far in the competition.

These 71 entrants were shortlisted down to 15 county finalists across 3 categories – Best Idea, Best Start Up Business and Best Established Business. The finalists took part in an intensive 3 day Business Boot Camp and mentoring before the county final which was held on December 13th. The winners and

runners up in each category shared in the €50,000 investment fund with the winners also going on to represent Laois in the regional final which was held in January 2018. The category winners were Declan Dunne, Crate Studio who won Best Idea, Jonathon Bracken from Bracken Enterprises who won the Best Start Up Business and Gary Cobbe from Irish Polymer Extrusions who won both the Best Established Business category and was also crowned as the best Young Entrepreneur in Laois. Although none of the 3 category winners progressed beyond the regional final, they marked themselves out as entrepreneurs with exciting careers ahead of them.



### Trading Online Vouchers

A recent research report found that Irish businesses who develop an online trading platform saw a 21% increase in sales with an average increase in employment of 1.4 people per business and 60% of businesses starting to export for the first time. The Trading Online Voucher aims to encourage Laois businesses to take advantage of the potential of online selling. In 2017 Trading Online Vouchers was approved for 11 businesses allowing them to develop an online platform for the first time.

### National Enterprise Awards

Infrastruct AMS from Mountmellick qualified as the Laois finalist in the 2017 National Enterprise Awards. Infrastruct AMS, was set up in 2012. The company was represented by company founder Dr. Thomas Callanan. The company provides a range of structural testing and investigation services to the engineering sector throughout Ireland and in Britain and the Middle East. They have a particular expertise in the monitoring, cleaning, chlorination and refurbishment of drinking water reservoirs.

### National Ploughing Championships

The Local Enterprise Village is one of the centrepieces of the annual National Ploughing Championships. Managed by the Local Enterprise

Offices, it is home to 31 diverse businesses from all over the country, exhibiting their products while highlighting the supports they received from the Local Enterprise Offices in their business development.

Thousands of visitors passed through the Local Enterprise Village this year, meeting with the business representing Laois, Paddy O's Granola which was founded in Cullahill by Paddy O'Connell. Paddy began making granola as a student to sell at farmers markets as a source of income. The feedback was extremely positive and after college he started to experiment with new methods and recipes in the kitchen above his parent's pub. Paddy O's has quickly grown to become one of the most recognised artisan food brands in Ireland and was one of the most popular exhibitors in the National Enterprise Village.

### Local Enterprise Week

Local Enterprise Week is an annual celebration of the strength of local entrepreneurs which is organised by each of the 31 Local Enterprise Offices. The event ran from March 5th to 10th and included a wide range of training, seminars and networking activities for businesses in Laois. Over 100 local entrepreneurs took part in the various activities organised that week.

### Export Development Programme

Local Enterprise Office Laois developed a unique export development programme in 2017 which saw 10 local companies supported to explore new export market opportunities.

This programme was developed through our recognition that Brexit would have a significant impact on local businesses and that they needed to have contingency plans in place to minimise the fallout from Brexit on their export activities.

Each of the companies attended a training seminar hosted by the Local Enterprise Office which focused on the twin issues of minimising the impact of Brexit on their British markets and developing alternative

overseas markets to compensate for the potential loss of British business. Following the seminar each business received one to one mentoring on developing export markets and were then presented with an individual medium term Export Development Strategy. This unique programme, which combined training, mentoring and strategy development, has provided the 10 Laois companies with a strong understanding of the approaches needed to develop their export activities over the coming years.

### Business Networking Night

Informal networking with other business owners is one of the most important supports entrepreneurs can avail of. In recognition of this LEO Laois held the "Laois Business Networking Evening" in September, an event which saw over 60 business owners meet, share ideas and listen to some engaging speakers.

Kelly Ging, the award winning young Portlaoise entrepreneur behind the successful "Kelly Lou Cakes" was interviewed by journalist Steven Miller from Laois Today about how she developed her brand and brought it to the national final "Ireland's Best Young Entrepreneur". She told an inspirational story of how commitment to customer service, quality produce and the clever use of social media has propelled her business since it was established.

The main speaker of the night was sporting icon and former Irish rugby captain Mick Galwey. He spoke on the theme of how experiences from his sporting career have benefitted him in his business life. He proved to be as motivational and charismatic a speaker on business as he was a leader on the sports field

### Retail Development Programme

Retail is one of the cornerstones of the economy in many towns in county Laois. Retail is also one of the fastest moving industries today and a retail business which is not in tune with industry development will soon find itself losing ground to its competitors. LEO Laois offered a comprehensive Retail Development Programme to local retailers in 2017 in association with one of Ireland's leading retail advisors.

The Retail Development Programme consisted of a seminar examining the latest national and international trends in retail and how these will impact Laois businesses in the coming years, an individual site visit to each participating retailer to examine their current store layout and operations and an individual action plan offering practical steps to develop the businesses. 15 Laois businesses took part from a wide

variety of customer facing businesses including pubs, cafes, shops, hairdressers and pharmacists. Each of the participants found it an extremely worthwhile investment of their time and it has had immediate benefits for each business.

### Lean For Micro

Lean techniques are used to address competitiveness issues within businesses, building the capability of their people to identify issues and improve their operations. Lean is about being effective and efficient - doing things quicker, better and cheaper. Lean strives to stamp out waste and to continually improve. LEO Laois recognises these very substantial improvements in productivity and profitability that can result from the application of lean principles and has supported Laois business owner/managers to effectively embracing lean methodologies in their businesses.

In 2017 LEO Laois hosted 2 seminars on lean principles to introduce these methods to local businesses. Arising from these seminars 4 businesses were supported to take part in our Lean for Micro programme, an in-depth mentoring and advisory programme which allowed the businesses to work with a lean specialist to identify areas for improvement in their business. Each of these businesses has reported huge success in implementing lean technologies. The 4 participating Laois businesses came from the food, motor, hospitality and IT sectors, showing that the traditional view of lean principles being for manufacturing companies only is not representative of how lean can benefit all businesses.

### Food Academy

The Food Academy Programme is an initiative of the LEO Laois, Bord Bia and SuperValu to nurture new start-ups in the food and drink sector. It focuses on areas such as business planning, understanding consumer trends and raising finance and gives participating companies the opportunity to develop their products to the point where they are of a standard ready for sale in SuperValu. LEO Laois supports small local food and drinks producers through the Food Academy Kick Start Programme, a training and mentoring initiative. The Food Academy has been extremely successful in Laois and there are currently 9 small Laois food and drinks producers selling in SuperValu stores as part of the Food Academy.

### Management Development Programme

LEO Laois offered the renowned "Owner Manager Development Programme" to the owner-managers of businesses in County Laois for the first time in 2017.

The Owner Management Development Programme was our most comprehensive ever offering to small businesses in Laois with the objective being to get companies stabilised, ready for growth and increased competitiveness. The programme consisted of 15 workshops and a number of individual mentoring sessions. 9 Laois business owners/managers participated in this programme and they have recognised it as one of the most beneficial they have ever done.



### National Women’s Enterprise Day

National Women’s Enterprise Day is an annual celebration of the important role of women in business. Over 100 businesswomen joined us on October 12th for an event in the Heritage Hotel Killenard to discuss the theme of “Opening Doors to New markets”. The event was compered by Carol Coleman from RTÉ who oversaw a panel discussion involving nationally prominent businesswomen, Ramona Nicholas, Bernice Moran and Margaret Jeffares. Laois based fashion designer Heidi Higgins gave the attendance a preview of her new Online City Collection

### Performance Indicator 2016

#### Economic Development

No. of trading online vouchers approved by the LEO in 2016	18
No. of those trading online vouchers that were drawn down in 2016	17
No of participants who received mentoring from 01/01/2016 to 31/12/2016	218

#### 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 pro-

tected 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 2017 was 724. However, 195 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 2017:

Number of valid applications received:	528
Number of decisions made:	497
Number of applications granted:	475
Number of applications refused:	22

#### Customer Service Initiatives

2017 saw the continuation of the scanning of planning applications as they are received. The public were able to access all planning applications on-line within two weeks of the Planning Authority receiving them.

422 pre-planning meetings were held in 2017, 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 site pre-planning meetings.

42 Section 5 applications were processed by Laois County Council in 2017.

The Planning website continues to be a very popular attraction with 77,263 hits last year.

#### (ii) Forward Planning

Forward Planning plays a pivotal role in the physi-

cal, 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.

### County Development Plan 2017-2023

A new County Development Plan for County Laois was adopted on the 24th July 2017 for the period 2017-2023. A Ministerial Direction with regard to the Wind Energy Strategy was issued and concluded by the Minister on the 28th September 2017.

### Local Area Plans

The Graiguecullen LAP 2012-2018 was extended to October 2022 at the Council meeting on the 26th September 2017 in conjunction with Carlow County Council who also extended the Carlow Town Plan and Environs LAP. This is part of the Joint spatial plan for the greater urban area and will be reviewed in conjunction with Carlow County Council.

Work commenced on the Local Area Plans for Portlaoise, Portarlington and Mountmellick in Q4 of 2017. Issues Papers were circulated and one to one drop in events were held in each of the libraries of the towns in November 2017. This process will conclude in Q4 of 2018.

### Portlaoise Public Realm Strategy / Vision Statement

GVA BilFinger and consultants finalised a Vision for Portlaoise – A Strategy for a better Town Centre 2040 and beyond in May 2017. ‘A Vision for Portlaoise’ is a plan that re-examines and re-purposes the Town Centre of Portlaoise to succeed in a changing social, environmental and economic context to 2040 and beyond. It involved the development of a plan to deliver a more cohesive and balanced structure for Portlaoise.

It focuses on the creation of contemporary public spaces and buildings, and the development of linkages and walkways in a way that acknowledges the unique characteristics and heritage assets of the Town. The plan-making methods applied prioritised improving the legibility and usability of Portlaoise by delivering a public realm within a planning framework that provides well-connected and useable urban spaces for residents, businesses and visitors.

### Development Contribution Scheme 2017-2023

The Development Contribution Scheme 2013-2017 was reviewed during 2017 and a new scheme was

adopted by the Council at the October meeting. New incentives to stimulate house building and “live over the shop” were incorporated into the scheme. In addition the levies applied to commercial developments were reduced.

### Conservation

Two separate grants schemes for Protected Structures were run by Laois County Council in 2017, with funding from the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

#### Built Heritage Investment Scheme 2017

- €96,890 allocated to Laois County Council by DCHG (up from €50k in 2016)
- Allocated to 13 projects across the county

#### Structures at Risk Fund

- Two Laois Projects funded, total value €46,000
- Midland House Portlaoise and St Paul’s Church Portarlington

### Section 57 Declarations

A total of 14 no. Section 57 Declarations in relation to works to Protected Structures at various locations throughout county Laois were processed in 2017.

### Local Authority Development (Part 8 projects)

Part 8 consent for the following 1 no. project was granted during 2017:

- New Library development , Main Street, Portlaoise

### Dereliction

The Council is implementing its powers under the Derelict Sites Act 1990 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 then removed from the 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 ap-

pearance 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 2017:	9
Total Number of Files closed as a result of dereliction being addressed in 2017:	35
Total Number of Files:	66

### (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 was continued in 2017 by the Enforcement team to ensure that any breaches of planning law were investigated and followed up.

In 2017, Council Staff attended Court 32 times in respect of enforcement prosecutions and while some cases are still ongoing, 9 cases have been successfully resolved during 2017.

The Planning Authority served 119 enforcement notices, 284 warning letters and investigated 113 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 au-

dience 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:	182
Number of commencement notices for Change of Use /Alterations/Renovations/Extensions:	31
Number of commercial building Notices	25
No of commercial buildings covered:	25
Number of dwellings covered by valid commencement notices:	184
( of which 96 are "one off" dwellings)	
Number of buildings inspected:	30
Number of buildings inspected as a % of buildings covered by valid Commencement notices:	12%

### (v) Unfinished Housing Estates

Laois County Council is responsible for the taking in charge of estates. In 2017, 7 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 2017.

The following estates were taken in charge in 2017:

1. Jessop Court, Hynds Square
2. Ossory Court, Borris-in-Ossory
3. Castlegate, Portarlinton
4. The Village
5. Bellingham Area 1 Phase II
6. Glenbrook, Ballyroan
7. Ard Erin, Mountrath

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 2016

## New buildings inspected

New buildings inspected as a percentage of new buildings notified to the local authority	14.35%
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No. of local authority planning decisions which were the subject of an appeal to An Bord Pleanála that were determined by the Board in 2016	6
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% of the determinations that confirmed (with or without variation) the decision made by the local authority	66.67%
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**Performance of Enforcement cases closed as resolved**

Total no. of planning cases referred to or initiated by the local authority during 2016 that were investigated	102
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Total no of cases closed during 2016	149
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% closed cases dismissed under Section 152(2), or statute barred or exempted development	29.53%
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% closed cases resolved to the Local Authoritys satisfaction through negotiation	9.4%
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% closed cases due to enforcement proceedings	61.07%
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Total Number of Planning cases being investigated as at 31/12/2016	134
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**Housing Strategic Policy Committee**

**Chair:** Paddy Bracken, M.C.C.

**Members**

Willie Aird, M.C.C.  
 Caroline Dwane  
 Stanley, M.C.C.  
 Catherine Fitzgerald, M.C.C.  
 Paschal McEvoy, M.C.C.

**Sectoral**

Michael Kelly Jr.  
 (Development/  
 Construction)  
 Andrew Cremin  
 (Business/  
 Commercial)  
 Sheelagh Coyle  
 (Social inclusion)  
 Michael Cobbe  
 Community/Voluntary)

**Director of Services:** Gerry Murphy

**Senior Executive Officer:** Ian McCormack

**Senior Executive Engineer:** P J Dempsey

**Senior Social Worker:** Fionnuala Daly

**HOUSING SERVICES**

The Core Objective for Housing is to ensure that all our citizens enjoy an adequate standard of housing accommodation appropriate to their needs, and as far as possible, in a location and tenure of their choice and to provide a responsive and supportive housing service for those in need of assistance.

**Highlights during 2017**

- Acquisition of 48 units for social housing in various locations across the county.
- Successful delivery of 224 grants for disabled and elderly people living in the county.
- Successful delivery of 58 extra units under the SHCEP (Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme)
- Approval of Stage 1 design for proposed development of 5 units in Rathdowney

**Report on SPC**

The Housing Strategic Policy Committee met 5 times, in January, February, April, June & September 2017 at which various issues were discussed and noted by Members.

**Social Housing Investment Programme**

The provisional Social Housing Investment Pro-

gramme allocation for the period 2015 to 2017 was €29,400,000. This includes construction of social units, acquisitions, Part V units, Return of Voids and Capital Assistance Scheme.

During 2017, construction continued on 33 new units at Conniberry Way, Portlaoise and these units will be completed in Quarter 1, 2018.



A total of 48 housing units (including 1 Part V) were acquired. Twenty further housing units are currently in the conveyancing/sale agreed process. Seven capital schemes in Rathdowney, Mountmellick, Ballyroan, Ballymorris, Mountrath, Hillview and Harpur's Lane, Portlaoise are being progressed through the Department's Capital Stage Approval process. Under the Return of Voids Programme, in addition to the Council's own funding, the Department, in 2017, provided €33,170 for the refurbishment of 5 vacant units. In total, 56 units were refurbished and relet in 2017.

**RAS & Leasing**

To date the Housing Section has secured a total of 225 properties under the Rental Accommodation Scheme and 285 properties under the Social Leasing initiative. In 2017 forty seven new units were taken on under the Social Housing Leasing Initiative. A further 35 units have received Departmental approval and are expected to come on stream in 2018.

**Housing Assistance Payment**

HAP commenced in Laois on 1st December 2016 and 293 tenancies were active by 31st December 2017. All HAP properties must be inspected within 8 months from the time that the first HAP payment is made to the landlord. A total of 133 inspections were made in 2017. A total of 18 homeless presentations were accommodated through HAP in 2017.

**Traveller Accommodation**

The Housing Section continues to implement the Traveller Accommodation Programme 2014-2018.

Targets under the Programme for the accommodation from 2014 to 2017 have been met.

## Fabric Upgrade and Improvement Works

The Department's funding for energy upgrades and once-off adaptation grants allowed the Housing Section to also make significant structural improvements to a number of its properties. Under the adaptation works to social houses programme, 23 tenants benefited from works carried out such as wet rooms, shower facilities and ramps in 2017.

## Estate Management

Estate management remains a key function for the Housing Section. The Housing Section provided a range of supports to various resident groups including grants where appropriate.

## Private Grants

In 2017, the Department provided €936,729 for Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes for Older People and People with a Disability. Through effective management of the funding available the Housing Section has been able to keep the scheme open for all of 2017

## Housing Needs Assessment

A Housing Needs Assessment was carried out during the months of May and June 2017 and was completed and signed off on the 19th July 2017. A total of 160 households were assessed. 1,468 households qualified for social housing support on the Housing Needs Assessment date of the 28th June 2017. 66 households were determined not to qualify for social housing support.

## 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.

## Performance Indicators 2016

### Average Re-letting time and cost; Maintenance Cost by Unit

Average Time from Date of

Vacation of dwelling to the date in 2016 when a new tenancy had commenced. (weeks)	10.92 wks
--	-----------

Average cost expended on getting the Re-tenanted dwellings ready for re-letting (€)	5,402.73
---	----------

Average per Unit Expenditure in 2016 on Repair and Maintenance of LA Housing (€)	917.72
--	--------

### Private Rented Sector Inspections; Long-term Homeless Adults

Total no. of registered tenancies in the local authority area at the end June 2016	3,668
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No. of dwellings inspected in 2016	40
------------------------------------	----

% Inspected dwellings in 2016 not compliant with standards regulations	25.00
--	-------

No. of Non Compliant Dwellings that became compliant during 2016	10
--	----

No. of Adults classified as Homeless and in Emergency Accommodation on Night of 31/12/2016	7
--	---

% of Adults who on that Date had been in Emergency Accommodation for 6 months	0.00
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**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, Fire charges, Rents, Loans, 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 €66.57.

### Water and Waste Water Charges

On 21st October, 2016, Irish Water assumed responsibility for the management of non-domestic water customer invoices for standard Water Services including Miscellaneous/Ancillary Water Services. Irish Water also assumed responsibility for the payments, collections and the management of customer queries in relation to non domestic invoices. Laois County Council will continue to carry out meter reading and meter operations and will provide support to Irish Water in the resolution of customer queries.

### 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 2016

#### 5 year summary of revenue account balance

2013	€-493,027
2014	€-393,286
2015	€-297,861
2016	€-198,369
2017	€-128,095

#### 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 2015, 2016 and 2017

	2015,	2016,	2017
Rates	75%	76%	75%
Rent & Annuities	96%	95%	96%
Housing Loans	64%	65%	68%

### MyPay Update

The project is currently running on schedule and within budget. There are currently 72 employees based in the shared services centre. Waves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 have been completed on schedule with Laois, Offaly, Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath, Leitrim, Galway, Carlow, Monaghan, Cavan, Kildare, Meath, Kilkenny, Louth, South Dublin, Tipperary, Kerry, Wicklow, Sligo, Mayo, Clare and Donegal County Councils along with Limerick and Waterford County and City Councils, Cork and Galway City Councils and the LGMA are now live.

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

Value of Payments	€1,669m
Number of Payments	2,025,784
Number of Pay Groups Paid	5,457
Number of Payroll Runs	2,787

Work is well underway to bring Fingal and Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown County Councils live on board by the end of May 2018 as part of Wave 6. Work is ongoing with Cork County Council with a view to bringing them on board in 2018 also.

The Superannuation element of the project has commenced. 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 was successfully completed in Laois and Carlow County Councils together with the LGMA in September 2016.
- There are currently 15 Local authorities live for pension services with a plan in place to bring the remainder on board in 2018.

MyPay successfully attained the ISAE 3402 standard in 2017. This is an internationally recognised standard for service organisations.

MyPay has been chosen to administer the new Single

Public Service Pension Scheme for the Local Authority Sector. A further 12 staff have been sanctioned for the delivery of this service in 2018.

### Motor Taxation

This Section provides a service for all motor tax transactions and any issues pertaining to ownership and other queries. Online taxation is increasing year on year with 57% of overall motor tax business in Laois now conducted online. However, a recent customer survey completed on behalf of the Department, revealed that there is a certain element of customers who wish to continue taxing in person for varying reasons. The main reasons established include their preference to receive their disc on same day, some mentioning that they like the social interaction whilst others are not computer literate. A small percentage continue to utilise the postal service option. The total transactions carried out by this office in 2017 is 47,263.

### Rates

Motor Tax for vehicles registered after 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. The rates were last revised in January 2016 with two main changes i.e significant reductions for heavy goods vehicles with an unladen weight from 4,001kg to 12,000kg and from 12,001kg.

### Vehicle Licences

Gross income for the year fell by €485,559 to €7,335,532 compared with €7,821,091 in 2016, a drop of 7%. This fall was expected due to the steady increase in online business.

### Off the Road Declarations

If a vehicle is not going to be used in a public place, a self-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 2017, 984 SORD applications were processed.

### Vehicle Testing Procedures

Certificates of Roadworthiness for commercial/goods vehicles are carried out 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](http://www.nct.ie/vrt).

### NCT (National Car Test)

Testing of private vehicles is carried out at the various test centres location around the country. In Laois, the test centre is located at Lismard Business Centre, Timahoe Road, Portlaoise. The 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 2016

% of Motor Tax Transactions conducted online	51%
Motor Tax transactions dealt with at the public counter	46%
Motor Tax transactions dealt with by post	3%
Average no of public opening hours perweek	28.3 hours
Number of vehicle licence postal applications/% of overall postal applications which were dealt with	
a) on the same day	99.25%
b) on the 2nd or 3rd day	0.5%
c) on the 4th or 5th day	0.00%
d) over 5 days	0.25%

Revenue Collection

	31.12.2016	31.12.2017
Housing Loans		
a) Amount collected at year end as a percentage of amount due	65%	68%
b) Percentage of arrears:		
(i) Less than 1 mth	1%	1%
(ii) 1-2 Mths	1%	1%
(iii) 2 – 3 months old	2%	2%
(iv) more than 3 months old	96%	96%
Rents		
a) Amount collected at year end as a percentage of amounts due	95%	96%
b) Percentage of arrears		
(i) Less than four weeks	9%	12%
(ii) 4-6 weeks	11%	11%
(iii) 6-12 weeks	16%	15%
(iv) greater than 12 weeks	64%	62%
Commercial Rates		
Amount collected at year end as a percentage of amount due	76%	75%

**Annual Financial Statement 2017**

Revenue Account	Gross Expenditure 2017 €	Income 2017 €	Net Expenditure 2017 €
<b>Programme Group</b>			
Housing & Building	10,779,115	12,343,376	(1,564,261)
Road Transportation & Safety	14,913,055	10,177,938	4,735,117
Water Services	4,288,249	4,261,149	27,100
Development Management	5,803,933	2,800,529	3,003,404
Environmental Services	7,003,955	1,890,931	5,113,024
Recreation & Amenity	4,373,707	1,054,105	3,319,603
Agriculture, Education, Health & Welfare	702,650	309,808	392,842
Miscellaneous services	9,487,156	6,223,655	3,263,500
<b>Total Expenditure/Income</b>	<b>57,351,820</b>	<b>39,061,491</b>	

Net cost of divisions to be funded from Rates & Local Property Tax	18,290,329
Rates	12,982,287
Local Property Tax	8,558,877
Pension Related Deduction	-
Surplus(Deficit) for Year before Transfers	3,250,835
Transfers from/(to) Reserves	(3,180,561)
Overall Surplus for Year	70,274
General Reserve @ 1st January 2017	(198,369)
General Reserve @ 31st December 2017	(128,095)

**Capital Account**

Opening Balance @ 01.01.2017	733,395
Expenditure	26,787,643
Income	
- Grants	15,617,612
- Loans	4,750,000
- Other	4,853,096
Total Income	25,220,708
Net Revenue Transfers	3,025,200
Closing Balance @ 31.12.2017	2,191,660

**INFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY**

**Director of Services:** Gerry Murphy

**Head of Information Systems:** Beatrice Heneghan

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 8 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.

In excess of 3,700 support calls from all departments within the Council were processed by technical support staff during 2017.

**Council Website - Laois.ie**

Laois.ie had 518,446 page views in 2017 and 388,681 sessions, almost half of this traffic came from Tablet and mobile users. During Storm Ophelia on 16th October there were over 6,000 visitors to the site in one day with over 80% of this traffic from mobile and tablet users. As in previous years the Online Planning Enquiry facilities and Job Vacancy enquiries attract a large number of visitors, while Online Payment facilities are also very popular with our Website users and are a convenient way to pay for various Local Government Services. Housing and Libraries are also proving to be popular pages for visitors to the website.

**Our Council Day 2017**

On 7th March 2017 Laois County Council, together with other Councils nationwide took part in the Our Council Day social media blitz on Twitter. The purpose of the day was to raise awareness of the work completed by local authorities using the OurCouncilDay hashtag and proved to be very popular with #OurCouncilDay trending nationally throughout the day. Social media is a popular and powerful mechanism for communicating with members of the public and local businesses and Laois County has been very

successful in this regard with over 36,000 followers on the various social media platforms including Twitter and Facebook.

**Replacement of IT Server and Storage Infrastructure**

IT recently completed the procurement of new hardware to replace our existing server and storage infrastructure. The new solution is based on a HyperConverged technology which provides processor, memory and storage in a single appliance under a unified software management interface. The new hardware will provide the Council with a secure and robust environment for our data and systems and handle capacity and compute requirements for the foreseeable future.

The solution implementation will take advantage of our physical facilities with an Active-Active configuration, connected by fibre from Áras 1 to Áras 2. This will ensure an automated failover to either site in the event of hardware failure or physical damage at one of the locations. As part of the deployment an upgrade of existing network switches from 1Gb to 10Gb will ensure maximum throughput between buildings. The solution also has a cloud tiering component which will allow for seamless cloud integration where cloud storage can be seen as an additional drive or storage array on the network further extending the capacity available within the new datacentre.

**Security**

2017 saw an increased level of threat to our systems with a proliferation in global malware attacks. IT are constantly working on mitigation efforts in this regard and have commenced a project to replace the existing anti-virus solution with a next generation malware protection software. The new solution has both anti-virus and malware prevention functionality and is deployed from a cloud platform for ease of delivery and protection for systems even when used in remote locations.

**Performance Indicators 2016**

Total page views of the Local Authority websites in 2016	536,014
Total number of followers at end 2016 of the Local Authorities Social Media Accounts	36,692
Overall Cost of ICT provision per wholetime equivalent	€2,634.78

### Social Club

2017 was another very successful year for the Social Club. Membership currently stands at 308 but this number is growing as new staff members join and enjoy the many events organized by the committee throughout the year.

### Monthly Draw

On the first Friday of every month a draw for 3 prizes of €50 takes place for Social Club members. For December 2017 a very successful 12 days of Christmas Draw took place with 1 lucky member winning €50 each day.

### Summer Barbecue

On 22nd June the Social Club hosted a very successful Barbecue in County Hall which was attended by nearly 100 people.

### Theatre Outing

A group of over 40 people travelled to see the musical spectacular Miss Saigon in the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre on 19th October, the Social Club provided subsidized tickets and bus transport and a wonderful evening was had by all.

### Ecumenical Service

An ecumenical service was held in place of the usual mass in the Council Chamber on 14th November for deceased members and staff of Laois County Council. All retired and current staff members of the Council were invited with many attending. The change in format was very well received and refreshments were provided in the canteen afterwards.

### Christmas

The staff Christmas party was held on Friday 15th December in the Abbyleix Manor Hotel. 100 staff enjoyed a casino night with dinner and dancing and the night was a huge success. The kiddies party was replaced by a trip to see the pantomime Polly & the Beanstalk in Dublin in January 2018.

The last day Christmas draw was also a great success with the prize fund being increased again this year. It was also a Christmas Jumper Day with all monies raised donated to Mountmellick Flood Community Support.

### Retired Members

Presentations were made to staff members on their retirement.

### Other Events

Discounted tickets were provided for members for the following events:

Bloom - 59 people availed of tickets  
Subsidised packages to Dublin Zoo, National Stud/Japanese Gardens, National Aquatic Centre, Glendeer Pet Farm and the Galway Aquarium

Some of the other events held were:

Aintree Grand National Draw  
Easter Egg giveaway  
Scratch card giveaways

## 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 2017

#### COMMITTEES

Name of Committee	Members Elected	Number of Meetings
Local Community Development Committee	Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Jerry Lodge (R.I.P.) Councillor John King	10
Joint Policing Committee	Councillor Pdraig 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 Pdraig Fleming Councillor William Aird	4
Placenames Committee	Councillor Jerry Lodge (R.I.P.) Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor Tom Mulhall Councillor James Kelly Councillor Mary Sweeney	2
Audit Committee	Councillor John Moran Councillor Jerry Lodge (R.I.P.)	5
Laois School of Music	Councillor Mary Sweeney	3
Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee	Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Mary Sweeney Councillor Tom Mulhall Councillor John King Councillor Jerry Lodge (R.I.P.) Councillor Paddy Bracken	1
Kyletalesha Monitoring Committee	Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Seamus McDonald Councillor William Aird	1
Rural Water Monitoring Committee	Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor Tom Mulhall	3

**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 (R.I.P.) 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 (R.I.P.)
Laois Arts Theatre Company Ltd	Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Jerry Lodge (R.I.P.) 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 William Aird
Portarlington Leisure Centre	Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor Tom Mulhall
Portlaoise Leisure Centre	Councillor Jerry Lodge (R.I.P.) Councillor William Aird Councillor Noel Tuohy
Portlaoise Enterprise Centre	Councillor Jerry Lodge (R.I.P.) 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 Pdraig 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- Laois Third Level Initiative	Councillor Jerry Lodge (R.I.P.)

**PAYMENTS TO MEMBERS 2016**

Conferences	€ 9,106.59
Training	€ 49,662.43
Phones	€ 538.57
Monthly Expenses	€ 85,684.96
Strategic Policy Committee Chair Allowance	€ 24,000.00
Representational Allowance	€314,755.14
Cathaoirleach's Allowance	€ 19,927.98
Leas Cathaoirleach's Allowance	€ 3,986.07
Municipal District Chair Allowance	€ 17,937.68
Total	€525,599.42

## APPENDIX 111

The following are details of the conferences and training events attended by Members of Laois County Council in 2017

Conference	Venue	Date	Delegates	Expend.
27th Colmcille Heritage Trust	Gartan	24th & 25th February	7	€4,285.60
Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan	Carlingford	10th & 12th February	1	€ 520.99
What does a hard Brexit mean for Ireland	Carlingford	31st March- 2nd April	1	€ 469.07
National Planning Framework & Councillor	Letterkenny	26th - 28th May	1	€ 700.00
IPT - Changing Trends and Approaches to Drug and Alcohol	Baltimore	1st - 3rd September	1	€ 695.24
Celtic Conferences - What does a hard Brexit mean for Ireland	Clonakilty	20th - 22nd October	3	€ 930.87
Celtic Conferences - Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan	Carlingford	3rd - 5th November	2	€ 911.46
Celtic Conference - Practical guide to budget	Clonakilty	8th - 10th December	1	€ 593.36
		Overall Total:		€ 9,106.59

Training	Venue	Date	Delegates	Expend
<b>AILG</b>				
AILG Module 1	Athlone	16th February	5	
	Waterford	11th February	3	€1,371.11
AILG 3rd Annual Conference	Ennis	6th & 7th April	14	€5,707.08
AILG – Module 2	Arklow	9th May	2	
	Westport	13th May	8	€3,318.48
AILG – Module 3	Dundalk	10th June	5	
	Bundoran	15th June	1	€2,027.94
AILG – Module 4	Tivoli, Cork	23rd September	8	
	Tuam	19th September	1	€5,549.07
AILG – Autumn 2017	Sligo	12th & 13th October	10	€5,614.75
AILG - Module 5	Carrick on Shannon	21st October	1	€ 321.66
AILG – Module 6	Gorey	14th November	3	
	Carrickmacross	23rd November	1	€1,081.05

### LAMA

LAMA Spring Training	Gormanstown	28th & 29th April	1	€ 499.59
LAMA Autumn Training	Clonmel	28th - 30th September	5	€1,921.82

### Irish Private & Public Bodies Consulting Ltd.

The Housing Assistance payment	Letterkenny	27th-29th January	12	€8,828.76
Your Development Plan and Climate Change	Baltimore	28th-30th April	12	€7,858.42
CCMA/LGMA Collaborate locally to compete globally - Tourism	Enniscorthy	29th-30th March	1	€ 255.93
School of Law	Cork	27th April	1	€ 529.11
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly - AIR Training Event	Newtownmount	26th May	1	€ 100.00
Road Safety Authority	Dublin	1st June	1	€ 33.61
Environmental Pillar - Brexit implications for the environment on the island of Ireland	Dundalk	16th June	1	€ 118.25
Annual Rural Water Services Scheme	Claremorris	14th September	10	€3,559.83
Institute of Planning	Dublin	6th October	1	€ 113.02
8th Annual Tourism Workshop	Dromoland Castle	17th & 18th November	8	€3,852.95

Overall Total: €49,662.43

## HOW TO CONTACT US

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Accounts Payable, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664117
Arts Office, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664033
Cash Office, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674308
Civil Defence HQ, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664106
Environment, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674318
Housing, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664222
Human Resources, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664075
Landfill Site, Kyletalesha, Portlaoise	Tel: (057) 8620653
Library Headquarters, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8594982
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) 8674320
Sports & Leisure, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664041
Water Services, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674355