**LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL**

**COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE**





**DRÉACHT BUISÉID 2018**

**DRAFT BUDGET 2018**

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL

2018 DRAFT BUDGET

### To : The Cathaoirleach and Each Member of Laois County Council

Dear Councillor,

I enclose for your consideration the Draft 2018 Budget for Laois County Council for the year ending 31st December 2018. The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government by Circular Fin 06/2017 dated the 8th of September 2017 determined the period November 1st 2017 to November 30th 2017 as the prescribed period for County Councils to hold their 2018 Statutory Budget Meetings.

Laois County Council’s statutory budget meeting is scheduled to take place on Monday, 13th November at 11.00am. The process of considering and adopting the Budget must be concluded before November 26th 2017.

The draft Budget for the Financial Year 2018 has been prepared in the standard statutory format. The process of compiling the budget involves a number of stages including:

* Consultation within the Corporate Policy Group to consider budget strategy, local property tax rate and high level budget considerations.
* The consideration by the elected members of the impact of a variation of the Local Property Tax rate.
* Detailed review of all aspects of the draft Budget with Directors of Services, Head of Finance and all budget holders.
* The consideration and adoption of General Municipal Allocations by the three Municipal District memberships at their meetings of October 18th 2017 (Portarlington/Graiguecullen), October 18th 2017 (Portlaoise) and October 19th 2017 (Borris-in-Ossory/Mountmellick),

The final stage of the budget process is the consideration by the Elected Members at the Annual Budget meeting on Monday 13th November 2017.

Laois County Council is required by law to adopt a budget that is sufficient to meet the proposed expenditure for the year ahead. Total expenditure must be matched by total estimated income from commercial rates, local property tax, government grants and charges for goods and services. Furthermore, Section 16 of the Local Government Act 2001 requires the Council in discharging its functions to have regard to the resources available to it, the need to maintain essential services and to ensure that a reasonable balance is achieved across its functional priorities and service areas.

In addition to adopting the budget, the Elected Members must also determine the annual rate on valuation to be levied on commercial properties.

**Reserved Functions of Elected Members**

The members have a number of reserved functions in relation to the budgetary process as follows:

1. The members have the power to vary the Local Property Tax Rate (LPT) by a factor of plus or minus 15%.
2. The adoption of allocations at Municipal District Level.
3. The determination of the Annual Rate on Variation (ARV) must be decided by the Elected Members at the Annual Budget Meeting.
4. In accordance with the provisions of Section 31 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014, the Members have the power to set the proportions of rates refunds applicable on vacant commercial premises.

**Wider Local Government Context**

The remit of a number of Government Departments has changed since the summer of 2016. This has resulted in the reallocations of responsibilities and reporting arrangements relating to certain local government functions from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. For example, the DHP + LG continues to prioritize the supply and delivery of housing under the Action Plan for Housing & Homelessness (Rebuilding Ireland).

This Department also assumes the leading role in Water Quality and River Basin Management Planning. Environment, Waste Management and Climate Change functions now reside with the Department of Communications, Climate Change and Environment. Rural development functions, including Urban & Village Renewal, Rural Economic Development Zones, Rural Recreation and Library Development are now the remit of the Department of Rural and Community Development. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport interfaces with Laois County Council on funding allocations for non national roads, sport infrastructure and tourism projects. And in relation to the Arts and heritage projects the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht is the reporting entity.

Laois County Council has taken these changes in its stride, as the Council is well accustomed to and very adaptive to change over recent years. It must also be borne in mind that in addition to Government Departments, the Council operates service level agreements with:

* Irish Water
* The Food Safety Authority of Ireland
* Music Generation
* The Local Authority Sector in relation to MY PAY
* Enterprise Ireland, in relation to the Local Enterprise Office

and works in very close collaboration with Transport Infrastructural Ireland (National Primary & Secondary Roads, Motorways) the Office of Public Works, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Heritage Council of Ireland.

The changes in government programmes and priorities in addition to the decisions and considerations of the elected members, as well as the further development of the Council’s role in leading local economic and social development are well replicated in the Council’s Annual Service Delivery Plans and in turn in the Draft 2018 Budget.

**Budget Context 2018**

The last 10 years have witnessed a profound change in the way in which Local Government is funded. Over the same period the amount of exchequer funding to Local Government has contracted significantly. From a low point in 2014 at which time the Laois County Council budget stood at €53.9 million, the last four years has witnessed a steady increase in revenue expenditure. This trend is continued in 2018 and the draft revenue Budget for member’s consideration now stands at €63.9 million, an increase of €10 million over the period.

The decisions of the Members over the last 7 or 8 years have resulted in Laois County Council exercising prudent budgetary oversight and sound financial management to the extent that the anticipated deficit going into 2018 will stand at approximately €150,000.

The main factors that shape the drafting of the 2018 budget are:

1. An increased income from the Local Property Tax in the amount of €492,822.
2. An increase of €200,000 from rents on Council owned houses.
3. Increased allocations to Laois County Council under the non-national roads programme.
4. Buoyancy in income from commercial rates
5. A significant increase of €99,000 in the amount of public and employers insurance premium payable by the Council in 2018 to cover its liability across its main areas of work.
6. A continuing up-ward trend in the population of the County and the town of Portlaoise. Portlaoise at almost 22,500 is now the most populated town in the midland region.
7. The continuing requirement to address housing maintenance matters.
8. A requirement to provide funding towards asset and equipment replacement at Portlaoise and Portarlington Leisure Centres.
9. The requirement to meet targets and develop actions to comply with Public Sector Energy efficiency requirements, Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Measures and Decarbonisation measures.
10. Taking in charge of private and unfinished housing estates.
11. The requirement to protect the Council’s IT System from attack from malware and viruses

**Local Authority Budget main points for 2018.**

The Draft Annual Budget for 2018 provides for a significant and continued level of investment in the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of County Laois. It sets out to deliver on a number of core objectives as follows:-

1. To continue our investment in Housing and Community Services.
2. To develop and implement the economic and community plan for Laois that supports job creation, tourism and sustainable communities.
3. To maintain our level of investment in providing quality public services.
4. To contribute towards the protection of the environment and to assist in ensuring the County’s reputation for quality agricultural produce is maintained and enhanced.
5. To deliver improvements for quality of life in the County’s main towns and villages.

The gross revenue expenditure required to run public services in Laois on a day to day basis is €63.9 million representing an increase of 7.86% in comparison with 2017. The following areas of increased investment are of particular note:

* An additional sum of €211,000 towards the provision of window restrictors, fire blankets and carbon monoxide alarms in the Council’s housing stock in order to comply with new Rental Standard Regulations.
* An increased provision of €97,700 for repairs to Council housing.
* An additional sum of €110,000 to assist in Homelessness, bringing the total amount for 2018 to €210,000. In addition, the Council proposed to raise its homeless service expenditure by €34,000 bringing the total support to €59,000 for 2018.
* An increased sum of €52,000 for county road maintenance, footpath improvements, new public lighting and environmental works.
* Approximately €660,000 in additional funding for local roads maintenance and improvement including the provision of €285,000 for Local Improvement schemes.
* Increased support for tourism and heritage in the County in the amount of €106,000.
* An additional €25,000 towards improvement works in Fire Station.
* An increase of €80,000 for leisure facilities at Portarlington and Portlaoise.
* An increase in the library book fund of €10,000.
* An increase of €1.393 million in respect of increased activity in the MyPay shared service centre accounting for on-boarding local authorities and the public pension scheme
* Provision of an additional €24,600 in respect of the maintenance/ replacement requirements in the County’s playgrounds.
* Continued support for small businesses through the rates incentive scheme, paint the shop scheme and vacant property incentives.
* Funding of €240,000 in respect of the Rural Economic Development Zone Programme.
* Provision of €750,000 as Financial Partner to Laois Partnership Company in respect of the 2018 Leader Programme.

**The Funding of Local Government in Laois**

The combination of the retained Local Property Tax and the distribution of the Equalization fund amounts to €9,051,699 for Laois County Council in 2018. This represents a combination of €8,558,877 as notified by the Department in July and an additional amount of €492,822 that represents the increase of 10% in the Local Property Tax to be retained locally

While the Local Government Reform Act, 2014 introduced the concept of a General Municipal Allocation in reality the finances of the Council are such that there is only scope for expanding this provision by €38,000 in 2018. Members at municipal level will decide the detail of GMA apportionment in the 2018 municipal works schedule. A sum of €437,000 between the three districts has been provided but members also have a role in the discretionary maintenance of non national roads. The amount under this latter heading will be made known by the Department of Transport and Transport Infrastructure Ireland early next year.

Commercial rates remain our most important source of locally generated income and are budgeted at €13,040,000 for 2018. The increase in rates income for 2018 is due mainly to the occupation and valuation of new properties in the past 12 months. There are some indications of increased economic activity across the County and it is also noted that the number of vacant commercial properties is reducing and this is to be welcomed.

**Trends and Sources of Funding**

Table 1 illustrates the trends in funding of the Income & Expenditure account over the period 2014 to 2018.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Budget 2014 -2018** | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | 2014 | | 2015 | | 2016 | | 2017 | | 2018 | |
|  | € | % | € | % | € | % | € | % | € | % |
| **Local Government Fund/LPT** | 7,631 | 14% | 7,631 | 14% | 7,631 | 13% | 8,559 | 14% | 9,052 | 14% |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Commercial Rates** | 12,024 | 22% | 12,024 | 22% | 12,224 | 22% | 12,696 | 21% | 13,040 | 20% |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Government Grants** | 14,163 | 26% | 15,465 | 28% | 17,108 | 30% | 18,698 | 32% | 20,100 | 31% |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Goods & Services** | 19,143 | 35% | 19,000 | 34% | 19,149 | 34% | 19,288 | 33% | 21,708 | 34% |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Pension Levy** | 970 | 2% | 980 | 2% | 678 | 1% | - | 0% | - |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **in €000's** | **53,931** |  | **55,100** |  | **56,790** |  | **59,241** |  | **63,900** |  |

**Table 1**

**2018 – Sources of Funding**

**Commercial Rates and Supporting Local Business**

There is no change to the commercial rate for 2018.

In an effort to support small business, the small retail and hospitality sectors I am recommending the following to the elected Council:

* The continuation and retention of the incentive scheme introduced in 2016 aimed at the 1,400 or so, rate payers liable for rates of less than €8,000 per annum, wherein by those who pay in full and on time would receive a benefit of 4% rebate in 2018 and a 3% rebate in 2019.
* The retention of the incentive scheme for business start ups in vacant properties introduced in 2014, and
* The retention of the “Shop Front” scheme.

The retention of the 4% discount/rebate scheme to those ratepayers paying less than €8,000 can be seen as easing the burden on nearly 82% of smaller businesses and rate payers in the county and in line with this Council’s policy to support small business through difficult trading years.

I am not proposing any increase in parking charges in the Portlaoise, Portarlington or Mountmellick urban areas.

**Housing Supply and Accommodation**

The Housing Department of Laois County Council is a high spending and high income department reflecting the range of social housing supports provided to those members of our community unable to provide accommodation for themselves from their own resources.

While the capital investment in the provision of social housing is contained in the Council’s Capital Programme, the revenue budget also plays a significant part in the delivery and support of social housing under the five pillars of “Rebuilding Ireland”.

The Council’s housing programme (2015-2017) aims to deliver 366 homes over the period through a blend of direct build, leasing, voids, RAS, Part V and direct acquisitions. The Council is making steady progress under this programme and expects to achieve the target supply of homes. As this Council prepares for the post 2017 period and having regard to Government policy and announcements over the autumn of 2017 it is proposed to undertake the following actions:

* Purchase of sites and lands in Portlaoise, Portarlington and other areas through the use

of Compulsory Purchase if and when appropriate.

* Work closely with Approved Housing bodies in the delivery of more homes.
* Prepare a number of scheme layout plans/master plan for consideration by the members in advance of the statutory public consultation process.
* Explore the possibility of turnkey projects to increase the flow of completed units into Council ownership.

In the area of homelessness, the Council continues to fund its management and prevention and expenditure of €290,000 is provided for this purpose in 2018.

The Rental Accommodation Scheme, the HAP Scheme and Long Term Leases remain important sources of housing provision with expenditure recoupable from the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government.

The Council continues to provide investment in the maintenance and upkeep of its approx 2,000 housing units by way of the revenue budget and a sum of €2,995,000 is provided in this regard for 2018 – representing an increase of almost €331,000 by comparison to 2017.

**Economic and Enterprise Development in Laois**

Three years on from the Local Government Reform Act of 2014 it is evident that Laois County Council has taken a more central and active role in the promotion of economic development in its functional area. Laois County Council carries out important functions in its own right and on behalf of Enterprise Ireland under a service level agreement. The Councils Business Support Unit and the Local Enterprise Office will continue to collaborate very closely from its new base at County Hall that will also act as a host County desk for IDA and Enterprise Ireland in Laois. The BSU and LEO will continue to provide support for micro enterprise, SME’s and economic and tourism development generally as well as exploring and pursuing opportunities for foreign direct investment into the County. The operational cost of the LEO continues as a contra item in the 2018 budget and a sum of €900,000 is allocated to support enterprise, training and business innovation in Co Laois

In the course of 2017 the Elected Members agreed to the raising of a loan and the purchase of 79 acres of land at a location beside **Junction 17 at Togher, Portlaoise**. The purchase of the site provides a clear opportunity for Laois to set its own strategic direction for employment types and land uses at one of the prime locations on the M7 inter urban motorway. Members are advised that the contract for sale has now been executed and that the Council will take possession in a matter of weeks. The 2018 Budget provides resources to allow the Council to embark on a Master Planning and Marketing Strategy for the site. This is one of the Councils main goals for 2018 and will follow quickly on the heels of the ***Connect2Laois”*** business promotion and marketing strategy launched in October of this year.

The Local Community Development Committee (an independent committee of the Council) was established in mid 2014 and from 2016 is also designated as the Local Action Group (LAG) with responsibility for the delivery of the LEADER programme in Co Laois and in partnership with Laois Partnership Company and Laois County Council as financial partner.

The committee is statutorily responsible for the planning and co-ordination of local and community development programmes, in accordance with the 5 year Local Economic and Community Plan that was adopted by Laois County Council in early 2016. The LCDC also works in an oversight and partnership role with the Laois Partnership Company in delivering the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) in the County.

Laois County Council therefore occupies a significant and pivotal role in economic development locally and must structure itself to respond to new demands on Local Government, must work in partnership with IDA and Enterprise Ireland and must identify opportunities as they arise to stimulate economic development and create the environment for job creation.

**The Development of Tourism , Heritage and Recreation**

Laois County Council, working with Laois Tourism, is currently overseeing the development of a new Tourism Development Plan for the County. The focus of the new plan will be to develop a number of tourism attractions in the County such as Emo House and Gardens, a new visitor experience at the Rock of Dunamaise, the development and a better understanding of the Portlaoise Fort Protector all under the Ireland Ancient East branding. The 2018 budget provides a sum of €57,000 to assist and support Laois Tourism towards animation of the tourist experience in Laois and to develop a number of projects to a point where the Council can apply for Capital Funding from Failte Ireland in the period ahead.

The protection of the natural and built heritage is an extremely important function of Laois County Council, a countywide asset that is valuable in its own right but also to the tourism and visitor experience in the County. To this end and in acknowledging the concerns and interests of the Members as expressed over the past year a specific stream of funding is provided from the revenue budget for works to St Peter’s Graveyard and Tower in Portlaoise, JFL Homestead, Borris in Ossory Courthouse and for Kilabban Church.

Members will have noted during the course of the year an allocation of almost €1million from the Department of Rural & Community Development towards commencement of work on the Slieve Blooms Mountain Bike Trail. The partnership of Laois County Council, Offaly County Council and Coillte has now formally commenced the design and construction phase for the initial 35km of track with a view towards having a world class trail available to visitors by mid 2018. A sum of €250,000 is provided in the draft indicative capital budget as the Council’s contribution towards this €5,000,000 project.

The Council will continue to support festivals and community events and will work closely with the Laois Partnership Company to assist community groups to promote festivals and events of a larger scale to bigger national audiences.

**Town and Village Development and Presentation of Public Places**

The great work of all communities in Co Laois and the commitment to high standards by the Laois Tidy Towns Federation is extremely encouraging and all those voluntary groups as well as our own staff must be lauded for their outstanding efforts. There were a number of notable achievements throughout the county in 2017 not least the outstanding representation by Abbeyleix Tidy Towns in the international Entente Floral competition. There were also sterling efforts by Kiln Lane Estate in Mountrath, Rathdowney and Errill in the IPB/Co-operation Ireland Pride of Place competition.

The link between upkeep, tidiness, presentation of places and economic activity is very important and cannot be over emphasised.  It is proposed that work will commence on  town and village renewal projects in Portarlington, Mountrath, Ballyroan, Mountmellick, Camross, Emo, Killenard, Stradbally, Ratheniska, Errill, Raheen and Castletown in 2018 and provision of €48,000 in terms of matching funds from the Council has been made.

A sum of €520,000 has been provided in the draft budget for street cleaning, parks, landscaping and maintenance of open spaces and it is recommended that the cleanliness of our main urban centres remains a priority for 2018.

In addition the community grant aid scheme, so important to local community groups, tidy town grants and community projects is to be increased from €119,000 to €135,500 in 2018.

**Portlaoise as a Major Urban Centre and Driver of Economic Activity**

The 2016 census data confirms the population of Portlaoise to be approaching 22,500. It is now the largest town in the Midland area and is home to roughly one quarter of the population of the County.

Laois County Council completed a non statutory vision statement for Portlaoise in 2017 and is now on course to prepare the statutory local area plan for the Town in 2018. Elements of the Vision Statement will be transposed as objectives into the statutory plan. The plan will also have regard to the emerging shape of the National Planning Framework “Ireland 2040-Our Plan” and subsequently the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Midlands Region. It is critically important to the future success and national positioning of Portlaoise that a strong and progressive Local Area plan is prepared.

In order to make Portlaoise a true economic driver in our area it will be necessary to:

1. plan for a more cohesive and connected urban centre having regard to the needs of business, heritage and to cater for pedestrian comfort, safety and accessibility ,
2. pursue solutions for urban renewal and urban dereliction through identifying EU and other funding opportunities
3. pursue the provision of much needed additional parking in the vicinity of Portlaoise Railway station to cater for existing and future rail travel between Portlaoise and Dublin.
4. Plan for land use at Togher and provide for a strong inter dependency between the Town Centre and the Clonminam Business Park/Togher

It is expected that draft plans will be before the members in mid 2018 for consideration. As such the preparation of the Portlaoise Local Area Plan provides members with an opportunity to decide the future use of opportunity sites in the town, to take a new approach to dereliction and public realm treatment, to consider physical and cultural asset improvement and to identify opportunities for technological development in the town.

**Agriculture and Agri-Business**

Agriculture and agri-business is of significant importance to Laois and the regional and national economy. Agriculture is worth about €350million to the County and as a growth sector requires the full support of Laois County Council. This support is provided through our planning, roads and environment departments. In particular the environment Department assists and advises as to the necessary programme of measures necessary for good nutrient management and environmental protection. Our roads department is geared to assist in the delivery of Local Improvement Schemes and to undertake the necessary improvements on local roads in order for safer and more efficient farming operations.

The proposal to bring high speed broadband to rural communities in 2018 can be of huge assistance to the rural economy facilitating knowledge transfer and advisory services, herd and feed management, and nutrient management. To this end Laois County Council is now collaborating with the Department of Rural Affairs to facilitate the delivery of such infrastructure.

It is also noteworthy that there is a strong interest in animal sciences in the region, as evidenced in recent young entrepreneurship events in the county, and Laois could play its part as a possible centre for animal nutrition excellence, herd genomics and other evolving agri developments.

**Work Skills, Training and Education.**

The attraction of business and industry to Co Laois is a high priority for the elected members. In order to attract people and investors to our County it is equally important that we have a good supply of housing, good physical infrastructure, good cultural infrastructure and most crucially a well trained, adaptable and educated workforce locally.

It is vital that the County’s current and future workforce needs are met through increased participation, educational attainment, skills development and skills use to achieve greater productivity and to support economic and social prosperity and growth.

While Co Laois has benefitted from a new school building programme in recent years it is equally noticeable that the third level education facility in Portarlington continues to witness an increasing demand for services.

It is appropriate therefore that Laois County Council works with all relevant partners to improve access to third level education and skills training. It is in the interest of County Laois to support outreach initiatives where and whenever possible and to work with NUI Maynooth, Athlone IT and Carlow IT as the proposal for a Technical University for the South East advances.

Work will continue in 2018 to update the skills database for Co Laois to match it to employers’ requirements and to encourage the 11,500 people that commute to work outside County Laois every day to use the new database. A sum of €10,000 has been included to undertake a skills audit for Laois.

**Local Authority Governance and Management**

**Audit Regime**

It is fundamental to the management and operation of Laois County Council that a sufficient level of control and oversight is in place at all times. Good governance is a key factor in attracting new business to Laois as well as engendering trust and transparency for the people of Laois.

The Laois Internal Audit Committee has been in place for over 9 years and I wish to thank the members of the Committee including Cllr Jerry Lodge and Cllr John Moran for their work in this important area of local government scrutiny.

The Local Government Reform Act 2014 provided for the establishment of the National Oversight and Audit Commission to examine local government performance. The Council is also scrutinized by the Local Government Audit Service, by Transport Infrastructure Ireland, by the Department of Transport, by the Environmental Protection Agency, by the Department of Housing Planning and Local Government and by the Health and Safety Authority. This level of oversight is essential in the delivery of a wide array of services provided by Laois County Council.

Members should note that Laois Co Council continues to report to the EU on a quarterly basis in relation to financial performance.

**Strategic Policy Committees**

The Councils four Strategic Policy committees, Committee 1, Economic Development, Enterprise and Planning, Committee 2, Housing, Committee 3, Community, Social, Cultural and Heritage and Committee 4, Transportation, Environment and Emergency Services have addressed major strategic issues facing the County under the Chairmanship of Councillors John Moran, Jerry Lodge, Paschal McEvoy, Brendan Phelan, Seamus Mc Donald, Jimmy Kelly, Mary Sweeney and Paddy Bracken.

The SPCs are an important part of the Councils policy development process and they dealt with a very significant range of policy matters during 2017.

**Municipal District Committees**

The Council’s three district committees of Borris in Ossory/Mountmellick, Portlaoise and Graiguecullen/Portarlington under the current Chairmanships of Councillors John King, Mary Sweeney and John Moran, respectively, met to deal with issues relating to service delivery on an area basis and to agree programmes of works to be included in the new municipal works schedules. The municipal committees have addressed a range of road, traffic management, village renewal, community, environmental improvement and service issues for their localities in 2017.

**Service Divisions**

The attached pages detail the expenditure and income arising in each of the service divisions. The draft budget was prepared by the Management Team and was examined and considered by the Corporate Policy Group.

**Capital Programme 2018 to 2020**

The elected members will consider a revised three year capital programme at the statutory Budget meeting of the Council. The draft revenue budget 2018 makes provision for repayment of portion of capital deficit balance incurred on a number of capital projects over the past 6 years. The total value of capital works included in the revised programme amounts to an estimated €61.38 million but the delivery of such works is entirely contingent on funding becoming available to the Council through state grants, development levy income and contributions from other sources such as partnerships or EU specific programme financing.

**Development Contributions**

At this point in 2017 just over €700,000 in development charges has been collected. The scheme was revised and approved by the Members in late 2017 so that added stimulus could be provided to the housing construction sector. The workings of the new scheme will be monitored in 2018.

Conclusion

I wish to thank all the members of the Council, Cathaoirleach Cllr. Padraig Fleming and his predecessor Cllr. Tom Mulhall for their continuing work in advancing the interests of the County.

The members through their actions have ensured that significant positive development will take place in the county and that Laois will further benefit as economic circumstances improve.

I wish to include in my thanks the SPC chairs, and the chairs of the Municipal Districts.

I wish to acknowledge the members of staff who retired in 2017 and to thank them for their outstanding public service to the people of Laois.

I also would like to remember all those associated with the Council who have sadly passed away in the last year.

I wish to record my particular appreciation to Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance for his work in preparing the 2018 Draft Budget and for his role in the management of the Council’s Revenue and Capital accounts. I wish to reserve words of thanks also to Julie Bergin, Financial Management Accountant, and staff in all Departments for their assistance in preparing the 2018 Draft Budget.

Special thanks are due to all the staff of the Council including, Kieran Kehoe, Donal Brennan and John Forde, Directors of Services for their unstinting commitment and hard work over the past year.

**I recommend to the Council the formal adoption of the Draft Budget and that the General Rate on Valuation of €66.57 be retained in respect of the financial year 2018**.

**I also recommend the retention of a 4% rates rebate scheme for rate payers paying less than €8,000 per annum.**

Mise le meas,

**John Mulholland**

**Chief Executive**

**6th November, 2017**

**SERVICE DIVISION – ROADS, TRANSPORTATION & EMERGENCY SERVICES, PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

**Roads**

**Road Schedule, MAPROAD, Pavement Management System**

The public road network for County Laois is summarised in Table 1 below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Road Category** | **Kms** |
| **Motorway** | **63.0** |
| **National Secondary** | **100.2** |
| **Regional** | **348.4** |
| **Local** | **1,845.4** |
| **Total Network** | **2,357.0** |

**Table 1 Road Network Categories**

**Map Road/Pavement Management System**

All DTTS grant allocations, from 2014 onwards, are governed by a Pavement Surface Evaluation and Rating System. This provides for a consistent approach to the evaluation of pavement conditions across the state. In turn the pavement evaluation and rating system enables the prioritisation of schemes for inclusion in works programmes etc.

Such evaluation and rating systems form part of an overall road management system that will include for maintenance of the road schedule, project details, bridge management data, road opening licences and administration of state grants associated with the maintenance and improvement of the road asset.

In terms of the Pavement Surface Evaluation and Rating System I confirm that surveys have been conducted in County Laois since 2014 associated with the Local Primary and Local Tertiary Network.

Ratings can be described as:

* Rating 1-4
  + Road Conditions are ranging from poor to very poor and road needs reconstruction.
* Rating 5-6
  + Road Conditions reasonable with only localised repairs and routine

maintenance required.

* Rating 7-10
* Road Conditions good to excellent with only routine maintenance required.

The Table below summarises the condition ratings across the Road Network for County Laois.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Rating 1-4** | **Rating 5-6** | **Rating 7-10** |
| Regional (R) | 33.3 | 101.15 | 170.6 |
| Local Primary (LP) | 90.6 | 219.4 | 197.9 |
| Local Secondary (LS) | 87.7 | 192.3 | 194.9 |
| Local Tertiary (LT) | 89.1 | 123.5 | 174.0 |
| TOTALS | 300.7 | 636.35 | 737.4 |

**Table 2**

**Table 3**

**2017 Budget Allocation & 2018 Planned Works**

The following points are worthy of note:

* 2017 Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) Grants for National Road Improvement and Maintenance total € 1,144,438 compared to € 609,267 in 2016, a €535,171 increase primarily as a result of the €750,000 allocation to the N80 Maidenhead Realignment Scheme It is hoped that we would receive at least a similar allocation for 2018 in relation to improvement and maintenance. We have an approved CPO for the N80 Maidenhead realignment Scheme and we have submitted a set of contract documents to TII for consideration. We anticipate going to tender on this scheme, subject to TII approval in Q2 of 2018 with a commencement envisaged for Q3 of 2018.
* Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport grant allocations for the Non-National Road Network total € 7,688,729 for 2017 as compared to € 6,421,228 in 2016, an increase of € 1,261,501. Allocations for 2018 maintenance and improvement are expected to be greater than 2017. The increased allocation for 2017 is mainly due to the €1M allocation for Portlaoise Southern Circular Route. This scheme now has an approved Part VIII planning permission, an operable CPO and land acquisitions are at an advanced stage. It is expected that we will have tender documentation with DTTAS for the end of November 2017 and subject to DTTAS approval we will be going to tender in early Q1 2018 and to construction in Q2 2018.
* Laois County Council own funds are provided under our County Roads Maintenance heading, 2018’s allocation for County Roads maintenance is proposed at €1,020,000 and this includes for the recruitment of 3 General Operatives.
* Laois County Council own funds of €150,000 are allocated to the upgrade of junctions across the County.
* In relation to Regional and Local Road Strengthening & Maintenance we will endeavour to carry out 30km of strengthening works and 30km of surface dressing resurfacing works across the road network in accordance with the road ratings as mentioned above.
* Public Lighting costs are increasing due to the increased PSO levy for 2018 and the increased costs of materials. Laois County Council will also continue to engage with the National shared services plan to upgrade all our lighting stock to high efficiency LED lights.
* Speed Detection Signs have been installed at a further 3 locations and are proving very effective in as a road safety measure.
* 8 no. Low Cost Safety Improvement Schemes with an allocation of €150,000 were completed in 2017 and we would hope to carry out a similar number in 2018, with works including improvement in road & junction geometry, signage and traffic calming measures.
* Bridge Improvement Works are funded under DTTAS Specific Improvement Grant of €200k. We have made an application for similar funding for 2018.

**8 Laois County Fire & Rescue Service**

With 8 Fire Stations and total numbers at 75 across all ranks we will continue to maintain and improve our service to the public. We propose the following improvement works at the following stations:

Vehicle Exhaust Extraction System – Durrow = €10,000

New Store for Stradbally Fire Station = €10,000

We are also upgrading the following equipment in our Fire services:

BA sets & cylinders - €15,000

Working at Heights Kit - €5,000

Trench Rescue Equipment - €7,500

Automatic External Defibrillator - €3,500

We are also proposing to introduce a new specialist fire documentation management system to Laois Fire services.

We have recently published version 11 of our Major Emergency plan incorporating other National pans as required.

**Civil Defence**

We received substantial support from the Department of Defence Capital Allocations in 2017 including €25,000 for a communications vehicle, €20,000 for a transit van and €7,000 for an inflatable tent for use at emergency situations.

**Planning Development and Control**

**National Planning Framework**

Initial public consultation was carried out on the Ireland 2040 – National Planning Framework document in February 2017. A draft NPF was published for consultation in October 2017 and Laois County Council made strong submissions to both phases of consultation. The Regional Spatial & Economic Strategies will commence preparation before the end of 2017 and will be finalised in 2018.

**County Development Plan 2017-2023**

The Draft Laois County Development Plan 2017 -2023 was adopted in June 2017 however we received a Ministerial Direction subsequently and that Direction took effect in September 2017. 2 companies have initiated Judicial Review proceedings against Laois County Council following adoption of the Plan.

Graiguecullen LAP as part of the Joint Spatial Plans for Carlow Town and Environs was extended for 4 years in 2017. Works have commenced on the review of the Portlaoise, Portarlington and Mountmellick LAPs and these will be adopted in 2018.

**A Vision for Portlaosie 2040 and Beyond**

GVA BilFinger and consultants completed a Public Realm Plan and Vision Statement for Portlaoise town in 2017. Laois County Council is now advancing the implementation of some of the identified objectives of the vision statement. Initial focus will be placed upon the strategic connecting laneways between Main Street and Lyster Square as well as advancing the River Triogue Blueway.

**Unfinished Housing Estates**

It is expected that 8 estates will have been taken in charge by the end of 2017. It is anticipated that the Council will bring forward a similar number in 2018 for taking in charge.

**Heritage**

As part of Budget 2018 the Heritage section has included proposals around the following initiatives:

* Further enhancements to Old St. Peter’s graveyard, Portlaoise
* Protection of Heritage Maps and Land League Banners
* Works on Kilabban Monastic Site
* Architectural Conservation Report on Borris-inOssory Courthouse
* Maintenance and Repairs to Donaghmore Workhouse

**Economic Development**

Laois County Council organised an extremely successful business awards night in April 2017. With over 100 applications for Awards over 20 awards were conferred on the night in the Midlands Park Hotel.

Substantial progress was made in the REDZ programmes for 2017 with over 20 businesses and individuals signing up to the “Business of Food” programme. We are also funding over €200,000 to the provision of a FABLAB and hot-desking facilities in Portarlington Enterprise Centre as part of the REDZ programme and Town & Village Renewal Schemes.

**Marketing Strategy for County Laois**

Marketing Consultants – Strategem iLabs - completed a Marketing Strategy for Laois in order to attract inward investment into the County and encourage local enterprise. In association with LCC Business Support Unit the Consultants prepared a detailed, innovative Action Plan taking cognisance of all aspects of life in County Laois to achieve the following objectives:

* Establish a strong and clear economic identity for Laois – “Connect 2 Laois”
* Identify and develop online and social media marketing solutions to promote the County’s attractiveness and competitiveness to a local, regional, national and international business audience – New Website Launched
* Make suggestions as to how, either collectively or individually, the stakeholders in the County can work to promote a positive image of Laois in a local, regional, national, and international context.

**Local Enterprise Office**

The LEO will continue to offer its range of supports to the business sector in Laois. The recent relocation and official opening of the LEO offices with the new Business Support Unit will greatly improve the service we provide to the sector and further develop the “one-stop-shop” concept in relation to business supports for the County.

**SERVICE DIVISION – COMMUNITY, ENVIRONMENT, WATER SERVICES, HUMAN RESOURCES AND CORPORATE AFFAIRS**

**Environment**

To date, 2017 has been another busy year for the staff of the Environment Section. A targeted anti-dumping campaign was launched in March 2017 and with it a number of initiatives were carried out. There has been an increased use of mobile cameras (CCTV) in Waste Enforcement and in Litter Enforcement. New mobile cameras were purchased and are being used at various locations across Co. Laois. This has resulted in offenders being identified and either costs for clean up being paid or the site being remediated by the offender.

Access barriers were installed at a number of bog sites prone to illegal dumping. A targeted awareness campaign in the form of billboards and radio media was carried out in addition to the introduction of new anti-dumping signage.

New uniforms for the Environmental Patrol Officers were introduced to further enhance visibility across the county; this will be complemented by new vehicle signage before the end of the year.

During 2017 there has been a focus on improving Bring Banks locations; to date 40 of the 46 existing sites have had their bring banks replaced and upgraded. The focus will continue into 2018 with the replacement of difficult to access sites and by increasing the number of sites in order to meet the recycling needs in County Laois. To counteract the misuse of the Bring Bank facilities, there will be an increased use of mobile cameras, introduction of new signage for the Environmental Enforcement and a community awareness campaign.

Annual initiatives such as *Clean up Laois Week* and the *Community Grants Scheme* were progressed and will continue to be an important part of the Environment Section work programme for 2018. *Reuse Month* took place in October.

Significant progress was again made by the local Tidy Towns groups that submitted applications to the national competition. In all there were five medal winners: Abbeyleix (Gold Medal), Portlaoise (Silver) and Ballacolla and Castletown (Bronze) and Cullahill (Endeavour Award).

In addition, Abbeyleix was chosen as one of two Irish locations to represent Ireland in the **Entente Florale Europe Competition**. The results were announced on 15th September 2017 and Abbeyleix achieved a Silver Award as well as the President Prize for Biodiversity for the Abbeyleix Bog –one of only two European locations to walk away with two prizes.

On another positive note, the performance by Portlaoise in the IBAL (Irish Business Against Litter) rankings with the town retaining a “Clean to European Norms” standard and increasing its first round score from joint 21 in 2016 to joint 19 in 2017.

A significant refurbishment of the Landfill Site areas accessed by the public at Kyletalesha was carried out this year incorporating a new public tipping area and additional site improvement works. The software payment system is currently being updated to further improve customer service at the site.

**Water Services**

Laois County Council will continue to provide public water and wastewater services to the people of Co. Laois, in collaboration with Irish Water, through a Service Level Agreement (SLA) and in accordance with an agreed Annual Service Plan (ASP).

The Local Authority however remains the Water Services Authority in connection with Group Schemes (GWS), Private Wells, and Domestic Wastewater Treatment Systems (Septic tanks). Funding is provided each year to administer a grant and subsidy scheme under the Rural Water Programme and to provide advice and support to Group Water sector in the county to continue to maintain a high quality water supply in line with the EU drinking water quality standards. The total Rural Water expenditure for 2017 is expected to exceed €600,000 based on Departmental allocations and expenditure to date.

I am pleased to advise that Laois County Council’s Water Services Laboratory extended its accreditation under ISO 17025 for drinking water check parameters plus nitrates to include Enterococci and Hardness.

**Human Resources**

There have a number of staff recruitment campaigns during the year arising from retirements, resignations and some centrally funded positions.

There have been 23 open recruitment competitions and 12 confined competitions held year to date in 2017. This resulted in a total of 463 applications received, with 306 candidates being called to interview (including shortlisting interviews).

A total of 55 appointments were made over the last 12 month period.

In addition there were over 1000 expressions of interest for a new Clerical Officer panel with over 800 people taking part in the aptitude test which has formed part of the short-listing process.

Summer Student Placement Programme: The Council advertised the above programme in 2017 and a total of 21 students were employed during the summer months. Eight of these students were assigned to environmental enhancement works, with 4 assigned to Portlaoise town, 4 to Portarlington town and the remainder were office based. This is a valuable exercise with mutual benefits for both the Council and the student alike and will be continued in 2018.

**Receptions**

The Members of Laois County Council accorded Receptions to the following during 2017:

* Mr. Charles Flanagan, T.D., Minister for Justice and Equality,
* Laois IFA,
* Nicole Turner,
* The Cooper Family Syndicate and
* Portarlington Lions Club.

In addition, revised Protocols in relation to the conferring of civic honours were adopted by the Members at their meeting on 29th May 2017.

**Annual Service Delivery Plan**

The Annual Service Delivery Plan for 2017 was adopted by the Members at their meeting held on 27th February 2017. Work will commence on preparing the 2018 Plan in the coming weeks.

**Library Services**

The Library service continues to play a pivotal role for all communities in Co. Laois. They offer an efficient frontline service for all members providing them with access to books, media, online services and internet/wifi.

Visits to the library continue to rise with over 192,000 recorded for the 10 months to October.

The libraries work with many groups within their communities and offer a varied events and exhibitions programme. This year, there have already been over 1000 events hosted across the County. Highlights include author visits, knitting groups, ciorcal comhrá and book clubs, while the art galleries in both Mountmellick and Abbeyleix remain very popular venues for hosting art, cultural and educational exhibitions.

**Summer Reading Challenge**

Laois County Library Service has organised a summer reading challenge and this year we participated in the national Summer Reading Programme supported by the LGMA Libraries Development Unit. This initiative was funded by Laois County Council. The event is for primary school children to promote literacy development and encourage non readers to engage with books. It has gone from strength to strength and this year more than 1200 children received medals for completing the challenge.

**Creative Ireland**

Creative Ireland has strengthened the county library programmes to date in 2017 supporting children’s events and activities, promoting STEM (Science Technology, engineering and Maths) events in Libraries with planned events for Science week and monthly events such as computer classes, chess clubs and Lego Workshops which promote numeracy and learning skills.

Free Cultural Events such as Author visits, plays , Arts and Craft classes have been held in all libraries throughout 2017 .

As part of the Creative Ireland program, the Library service are continuing to digitise the archives of Laois County Council. In 2017 archives from Portlaoise Town Council have been digitized and will be available for researchers from the library website. A genealogy club has commenced in Portlaoise library and meets every second Thursday of the month in the library.

**Service Development**

In keeping with the national strategy for libraries “Opportunities for All”, a number of initiatives advanced in 2017 particularly the shared countrywide Library Management System-Sierra. Members of Laois County Library Services may now borrow or return library items from any library throughout the county. Members can also request any library stock from other counties and collect it at their local library free of charge . Free E-books and E-resources are provided for Library members direct from [www.laois.ie](http://www.laois.ie). Free Library membership is available for all citizens of Laois

**Capital Development**

Portlaoise Library

Design work has continued for the new county library at Portlaoise. In July of 2017 Laois County Council granted approval through the Part 8 planning process for the project. Currently Laois County Council are liaising with Laois Heritage Society and have conducted an archaeological investigation on the back car park area of the site due to the proximity of the original Fort wall of Maryborough which dates back to 1600.

**Community Development SERVICE DIVISION – COMMUNITY, ARTS, TOURISM, SPORTS**

**Community Development**

The 2014 Local Government Reform Act introduced a number of new community development and engagement structures namely the Local Community Development Committee and the Public Participation Network. These bodies have really found their voice in 2017 and are having a significant positive impact within our communities. Under the LEADER programme 21 projects were approved in 2017, with a number reaching letter of offer and payment stage. During the final year of the current Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, a wide range of social inclusion, community development and job activation projects have been successfully delivered. Strong progress was also noted in the implementation of the 2017 LECP action plan, with a number of agencies presenting to the LCDC on their specific progress. In addition, 2017 has seen the introduction of a range of new funding streams associated with the LCDC namely the Community Facilities Fund, Clar Measure 3, the Healthy Ireland Fund and the recently announced RAPID funding.

2017 was a strong year for Laois PPN with over 100 new groups registering with Laois PPN bringing the total number to 398. Over that period, in addition to regular newsletters to all PPN members, the PPN website was developed and successfully launched.  A range of support and information events were organised by Laois PPN throughout the year including a Crime Prevention Advice Session in association with An Garda Siochana in April 2017, the Laois Age Friendly Information Afternoon in association with Laois Older Persons Forum in September 2017 and the Laois Community & Voluntary Awards in association with Laois County Council in October 2017.

This year has seen significant progress under the Town and Village Scheme with the majority of the 2016 funded projects approaching completion. In July this year, 13 applications were submitted to the 2017 Scheme and 12 of these were successful. In 2018 we can look forward to over €980,000 in village enhancement capital works across the County which is a fantastic result for Laois.

Laois Age Friendly Alliance, the interagency committee tasked with delivering the Age Friendly Programme in Laois, delivered a range of initiatives including the Information Guide for Services for Older People, the launch of the first two Age Friendly Parking Spaces in County Laois and the introduction of Age Friendly Business Recognition Scheme Workshops. Coordinated by Youth Work Ireland Laois, in association with Laois County Council, the members of Laois Comhairle na nÓg made a presentation to the members of Laois County Council and were involved in consultations regarding the Midlands HSE Suicide Plan, Hospital Closure and the Strategy Plan for Youth Work Ireland Laois.

**Arts Office**

2017 was a very busy and successful year in the Laois Arts Office with the delivery of a wide range of programmes and events including the Artists-in-Schools, Summer Arts, Bealtaine Festival, Culture Night, Summer Arts Programme and Leaves Writing and Music Festival.

The Arts Office coordinates the Youth Theatre groups in Portlaoise and they had a showcase in the Dunamaise Arts Centre. Youth Theatre groups in Portarlington and Mountrath are assisted by Laois County Council .

Through the Laois Arthouse in Stradballyand the studio in Mountrath, we provided accommodation and work spaces as well as opportunities to present master classes and workshops by artists.

Music Generation Laois had over 3000 participants in 2017; Music at the Malthouse in May 2017 featured over 200 young people performing.; The Trad Summer School in July was a huge success with over 100 students from Laois and surrounding counties taking part; The annual Tionól: Gathering for Harps & Pipes took place in Portlaoise with over 110 students from across Ireland taking part with 20 tutors. In addition, the Laois School of Music have expanded with enrolment of over 330 students and have expanded the Laois School of Music Youth Orchestras to over 50 participants.

In June, the *30 Years Artists Places* exhibition concluded in the Dunamaise Arts centre, following a 18 month national tour. The exhibition was curated by Muireann Ni Chonaill. There was a conference on the theme of *Collections.* Artists, arts officers and those working in the arts travelled to attend in high numbers.

The annual *Leaves,* writing and music festival entered into a partnership with the OPW and as a result the Leaves event is being hosted in Emo Court. The festival develops an appreciation of literature and music, bringing a diverse range of local, national and international writers to the county. It also draws attention to the magnificent house and park we have in our county.

The Creative Ireland programme brought added value to the arts and culture programmes in the county. Highlights included the inaugural *Cruinniú na Cásca* hosted in the Dunamaise Arts Centre last Easter Monday.

**Tourism**

In 2017, Laois County Council’s Tourism Grants Scheme assisted in the promotion and support of local festivals and events which delivered a social, cultural and economic benefit to the County.  This includes large scale festivals and events including the Old Fort Street Festival and the Scarecrow Festival, Durrow. A new Tourism Development Strategy 2017 – 2022 will be completed shortly to support and promote the tourism potential of the County. Laois County Council continued to work with Failte Ireland to promote Laois under Ireland’s Ancient East Initiative.

**Sports**

Laois enjoys an excellent network of leisure facilities including two leisure centres and twenty community play facilities. Through significant capital investment in 2017, this was further enhanced with the refurbishment of Portlaoise Leisure Centre Playground in Portlaoise. In addition, Portlaoise and Portarlington leisure centres continued to deliver excellent service to the people of Laois. Under the 2016 Rural Recreation Funding, Slí na Sláinte walking routes in Portlaoise, Portarlington & Mountmellick will be installed and refurbished shortly. In addition to a range of successful Measure 1 applications, Rural Recreation Infrastructural Funding of €1m was allocated to commence Phase 1 of the development of the Slieve Bloom Bike Trail Centre.

**SERVICE DIVISION – HOUSING, BUILDING and INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

Work continues on the construction of 33 houses at Conniberry Way, Portlaoise. It is expected that these houses will be available for letting in Quarter 2 of 2018.

Architect Led Design Teams have been appointed for the design of 10 houses at Gleann na Glaise, Ballyroan, 10 houses at Pattison Estate in Mountmellick, 8 houses at Mountrath and 5 houses in Rathdowney.

A detailed design is being prepared by an Architect Led Design Team for the construction of 22 houses at Ballymorris Road, Portarlington.

Stage 1 Appraisal is being prepared for submission to the Department for approval for 2 units at Hillview, Portlaoise, whilst a submission is being finalised for Stage 2 approval for 1 unit at Harpur’s Lane, Portlaoise

The Council continues to work with Voluntary Bodies in the provision of housing in Portlaoise, Portarlington, Abbeyleix, Ballyroan, Graiguecullen and other areas of the County.

The IT Department is currently in the middle of a two-year roadmap of 23 projects, aligned to the Council’s Service Delivery Programme and the delivery of the National Strategy for the sector.  Projects completed to-date include the provision of a new Council-wide Managed Print Service, security review and upgrade and the replacement of the existing data centre which is at end of life.  This latter project will provide a hardware infrastructure to serve the Council’s storage and computer requirements for the next five years and includes seamless cloud integration as well as built-in backup and disaster recovery.

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