

**LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL**  
**COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE**



**BUISÉID 2017**  
**DRAFT BUDGET 2017**

## **LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL**

### **2017 DRAFT BUDGET**

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

Dear Councillor,

I enclose for your consideration the Draft 2017 Budget for Laois County Council for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> December 2017. The Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government by Circular Fin 05/2016 determined the period November 1<sup>st</sup> to November 30<sup>th</sup> as the prescribed period for Local Authorities to hold their 2017 Statutory Budget Meetings.

Laois County Council's statutory budget meeting is scheduled to take place on Monday, 14<sup>th</sup> November at 11.00am. The process of considering and adopting the Budget must be concluded before November 27<sup>th</sup> 2016.

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.

## **Budget Context 2017**

The members of Laois County Council are fully aware of the continuing and very challenging budgetary environment that has existed for nine successive years following the economic collapse in 2008. This has resulted in significant decreases in income available to the Council. Furthermore it is difficult to identify new sources of income for the Council as any national recovery in economic performance appears for the time being to benefit the major population centres. The elected members have, however, addressed this profound situation very responsibly over the past number of budgets. On each year over the past nine years the Council has adopted balanced budgets, has overseen re-organisation of Council services with resultant efficiency gains and has made decisions so that prudential oversight of the revenue account has not given rise to any new deficits.

### **The main factors that shape the drafting of the 2017 Budget are:-**

1. Limitations on funding from the Local Property Tax and the Equalization Fund.
2. A requirement to consider increased income from local Commercial Rates.
3. An increase in population of County Laois of nearly 4,200 people since the last census in 2011, equivalent to a town the size of Mountmellick & 17,700 since 2006.
4. A significant increase (€119,000) in the amount of Insurance premium payable by Laois County Council in 2017 to cover its liability across its main areas of work.
5. An increased provision to cover the costs associated with the Public Service Obligation in respect of energy for public lighting (€61,000).
6. A requirement to provide a sinking fund to provide for planned replacement or refurbishment of assets at Portlaoise and Portarlington Leisure Centres, the Dunamaise Arts Centre and Treo Nua Family Resource Centre.
7. Increased regulatory requirements in relation to areas such as health and safety, environmental protection, building control, inspection of private rented accommodation and energy efficiency management.

8. Preparedness for the Housing Assistance Payment scheme and improving housing customer facilities at County Hall.
9. A requirement to provide for the taking in charge of private and unfinished housing estates.
10. Responsibility for managing under a service level agreement the Local Enterprise Office and supporting the Local Community Development Committee.
11. Supporting and promoting inward investment (including a new marketing strategy), local enterprise and tourism in Co Laois as set out in the approved Local Economic and Community Plan and the Action Plan for Jobs, Midland Region, 2015 to 2017.

I wish to acknowledge the significant contribution and action of elected members in working with the executive through 2016 to manage the Council's finances in a time of great change in the Local Government Sector. I also wish to thank the staff of Laois County Council for their tireless work and flexibility in implementing the necessary measures under the Local Government Reform programme while continuing to serve the public to the best of their ability.

#### **Local Authority Budget Main Points for 2017**

The gross revenue expenditure required to run public services in the County on a day to day basis is **€59.241 million**, an increase of 4% on 2016. Notwithstanding the pressures on local authority finances it is noteworthy that provision is made for:-

- Additional funding of €70,000 for housing repair and maintenance and eliminating homelessness,
- Increased funding of €80,000 towards local road maintenance and repair
- Additional support for strategic economic planning increased economic activity and business development in County Laois including marketing the attractiveness of Laois to a global and national audience.

- The provision of €30,000 in respect of this Council's contribution for flood relief/drainage schemes to be considered under the non coastal minor works programme in collaboration with the Office of Public Works.
- Further support for small and vulnerable business through the amendment and broadening of the rates incentive scheme for small and medium enterprises introduced in 2016.
- Additional funding of €35,000 for maintenance of urban spaces, parks and green areas.
- The provision of €20,000 to address energy conservation in the Council's public buildings
- Additional support in value of €5,000 for local communities and tidy towns groups
- Funding of €40,000 to support the next phase of the Rural Economic Development Zone programme.
- Funding of €76,000 as this Council's contribution towards Urban and Village Renewal Programme

### **The Funding of Local Government in Laois**

The preparation of recent budgets has been more complex and challenging than usual mainly as a result of structural changes in the Local Authority Sector and a more prolonged period for the budget process. For example, the elected members commenced their considerations for Budget 2017 in August when the detail of Local Property Tax was being examined. At the same time the members were evaluating the application and consequences of new municipal allocations as applied to the three municipal districts following the reform programme of 2014.

The model for Local Government Funding has therefore changed considerably over the past two years and in many respects it is not possible to compare components of the 2017 Budget exactly with previous years except to remark that in comparison with 2008 there is a reduction of approximately €14 million available to deliver public services across the county.

The combination of the retained LPT and the distribution of the Equalization fund amounts to €8,558,877 for Laois County Council in 2017. This is effectively the same as in 2016 as members decided not to apply any increase to the LPT at the September meeting of Laois County Council.

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 €19,000 in 2017. Members at municipal level decide the detail of GMA apportionment in the 2017 municipal works schedule. A sum of €399,000 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.

### Trends and Sources of Funding

Table 1 illustrates the trends in funding of the Income & Expenditure account over the period 2008 – 2016.

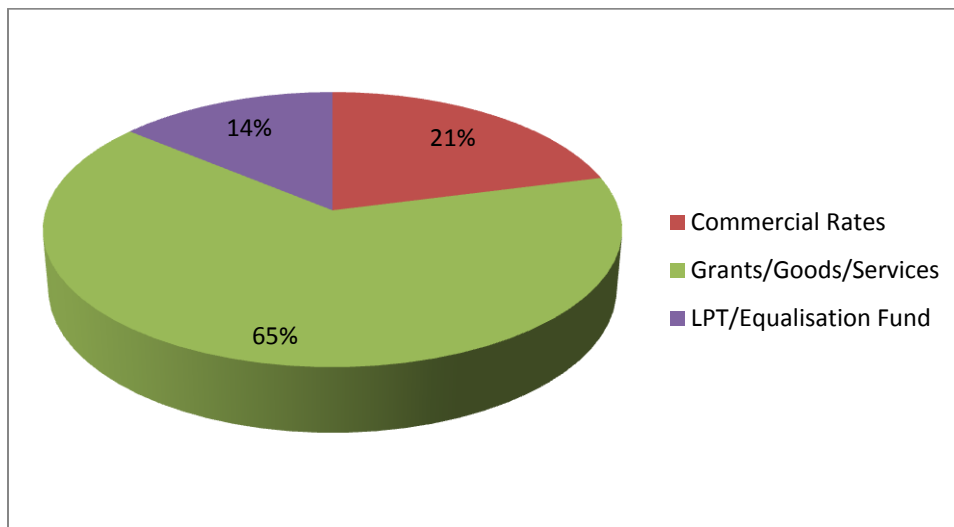
*Table 1:*

|                       | 2008          |             | 2012          |             | 2013          |             | 2014          |             | 2016          |             |
|-----------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
|                       | €'000's       | %           | €'000's       | %           | €'000's       | %           | €'000's       | %           | €'000's       | %           |
| Local Government Fund | 19,300        | 26%         | 13,189        | 20%         | 13,070        | 22%         | 7,631         | 14%         | 7,631         | 13%         |
| Rates                 | 9,246         | 13%         | 12,024        | 18%         | 12,024        | 20%         | 12,024        | 22%         | 12,224        | 22%         |
| Other Income          | 44,620        | 61%         | 39,350        | 60%         | 33,854        | 56%         | 33,306        | 62%         | 36,257        | 64%         |
| Pension Levy          | -             | 0%          | 1,125         | 2%          | 960           | 2%          | 970           | 2%          | 678           | 1%          |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>73,166</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>65,688</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>59,908</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>53,931</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>56,790</b> | <b>100%</b> |

*Figures on LHS of chart are in 000's*

### Sources of Funding for 2017 UPDATE

The following chart shows the principal sources of funding in the 2017 Budget.



### Staff numbers

The number of staff employed by Laois County Council is now 327 whole time equivalents representing a reduction of 114 or 26 % in comparison to 2008.

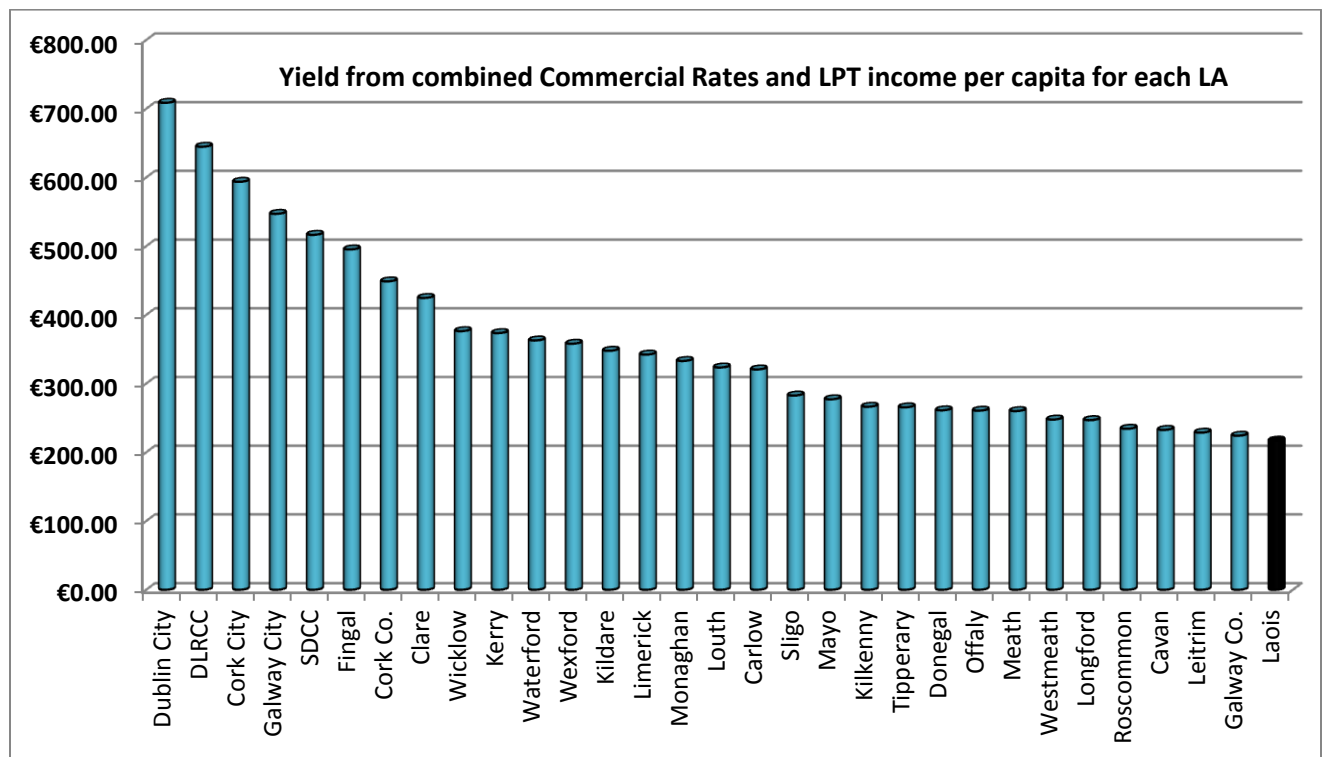
Despite an increase in demand for services across all functional areas and service divisions the Council has maintained a satisfactory level of public service and response to community needs. This is a significant achievement by any measure and reflects very well on the competence and dedication of staff in Laois County Council.

|                                 | <b>Whole Time Equivalents</b> |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 31 <sup>st</sup> December, 2008 | <b>441</b>                    |
| 30 <sup>th</sup> December, 2009 | 408                           |
| 31 <sup>st</sup> December, 2011 | 372                           |
| 31 <sup>st</sup> December, 2012 | 346                           |
| 31 <sup>st</sup> December, 2013 | 344                           |
| 31 <sup>st</sup> December, 2014 | 352                           |
| 31 <sup>st</sup> December, 2015 | 328                           |
| 31 <sup>st</sup> October 2016   | 327.                          |

|                           |                                       |               |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|
|                           | <i>-does not include 69 in MY Pay</i> |               |
| Total Reduction from 2008 | <b>114</b>                            | <b>or 26%</b> |

### Commercial Rates and Supporting Local Business

Laois County Council has not increased commercial rates on business for **eight** successive years despite the extreme pressure on Council finances and Laois County Council having a lower than average national annual rate on valuation (ARV). In addition members should be fully aware that the income to the Council from both Commercial Rates and Local Property Tax per head of population is the lowest by far of any Local Authority Area in the State. This position is shown on the chart below. It illustrates very clearly that the Council is underfunded in comparison to other authorities in carrying out its core functions, in trying to support local community development and in trying to stimulate economic and tourism activity in the County.





*Chart 2. Showing the combined income from Commercial Rates and LPT (2016 figures) per capita in each LA area.*

The Council, looking forward to 2017, is faced with an even more challenging resourcing and funding environment by virtue of a significant increase in population since the 2011 census, a requirement to fund more programmes such as flood relief, rural economic development zones, urban and village renewal, resolving homelessness, and providing for rural water quality, road safety and drainage, asset maintenance, taking in charge of housing estates and marketing aggressively Co Laois for inward investment.

Put simply unless Laois County Council can identify a new stream of funding or increase revenue from an existing income stream it will not be possible to present a balanced Revenue Budget for 2017.

There is a requirement to generate additional revenue of €370,000 in order to match expenditure across all activities. Given that there will be no increase in Local Property Tax nor the Equalisation Fund it is apparent that an increase in commercial rates must be fully considered.

I am therefore recommending an increase of 3% in the commercial rate for 2017. This will yield an additional income of €370,000 for the full year ahead.

However, as a measure to support small business, the small retail and hospitality sectors I am recommending the following supplementary measures to the elected Council:

- The continuation and amendment of the incentive scheme introduced in 2016 aimed at the 1,385 or so, rate payers liable for rates of less than €6,000 per annum, wherein those who pay in full and on time would receive the benefit of a 4% rebate in 2017 and a 3% rebate in 2018.
- 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 raising of the ceiling under the rates payment scheme to €6,000 can be seen as an extra effort to ease the burden on nearly 82 % of smaller businesses and rate payers in the county and is 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.

### **Local Government Efficiency and Public Service Cost Management**

The Local Government Efficiency Review Implementation Group has confirmed that the Local Government sector has achieved gross savings of nearly €1billion since 2008. Staff reductions in the sector have been recorded at over 25% in the same period.

Application of the Public Service Agreements to local government has assisted to manage this reduction in resources through more flexible deployment of staff and the lowering of staff costs through pay reductions, increment freezes, reduced leave and longer working hours, within an overall climate of constructive industrial relations.

The Local Government Sector accounts for only 10% of public sector staffing numbers but has accounted for 25% of the overall reduction in public sector staffing, a fact that is not acknowledged in public discourse. Neither is it acknowledged that Local Authorities have contributed significantly to national economic recovery in developing and participating in a wide range of shared services projects aimed at reducing costs, achieving efficiencies and improving customer services. Examples of shared services already commenced and in full operation include:-

- Payroll and Superannuation Shared Services "My Pay" (Laois County Council)
- River Basin Management (Kilkenny and Tipperary County Councils)
- National Local Authority Procurement Office (Kerry County Council)
- National Waste Collection Permit Office (Offaly County Council)

- Building Control Management System ( Fingal County Council)
- National Road Pavement Management (Donegal, Cork, Kerry, Tipperary)
- Shared Information Communication Technology (LGMA)

In addition to participating in the above initiatives Laois County Council has undertaken a number of localized efficiency and change management measures:-

- Establishment of Procurement Office including training for local suppliers.
- Establishment of an Energy Office
- Provision of flexible payment facilities (online, household budget, payment cards) for customers
- Introduction of a time and attendance management system and improved performance and development management.

The Council will continue to implement efficiency and reform measures in 2017 in accordance with the provision of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 and in accordance with government policy. Notable savings have been achieved over the past three or four years through the combined purchasing power of local authorities acting as one. Examples include a reduction in non metered energy costs, a national programme at converting public lighting to more efficient LED specification, reduction in price of bitumen and road making materials and imminent savings for legal services and design services for local authority housing under new procurement competitions.

### **Economic and Enterprise Development in Laois**

In 2014, the elected members of Laois County Council agreed to set up a new Strategic Policy Committee for economic development. Members will recall that 2014 also witnessed the abolition of the former County Enterprise Board, its functions now taken on by the Local Enterprise Office (LEO). Laois County Council carries out important functions on behalf of Enterprise Ireland under a service level agreement. The LEO will continue to act in partnership with the Council's Business Support Unit to provide support for micro enterprise, SME's and economic and tourism development generally. The operational cost

of the LEO continues as a contra item in the 2017 budget and an additional €83,000 is allocated from the Council's own funds to enhance this function. It is important for members to note that Laois County Council and the LEO office have facilitated the creation of 112 new jobs in the county in 2015. The performance for 2016 is equally encouraging.

Members have agreed to relocate the Business Support Unit/LEO on the County Hall campus in 2017 so as to provide;

- greater visibility/awareness to the business/enterprise community
- improved integration of public services, and
- a one stop point for assistance to start up or existing business.

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 delivery 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.

### **Strategic Direction for County Laois**

A number of policy documents, programmes and action plans have been prepared at national, regional and County level. These include:-

- Action Plan for Jobs – Midlands Region
- Food Wise 2025
- Operational Programme for the Northern & Western Region
- Laois Local Economic and Community Plan, March 2016
- Laois Local Development Strategy , 2016
- Ireland’s Ancient East

These plans in combination with the policies and objectives of the Laois County Development Plan will, to a large extent, dictate the strategic directions for economic and social development in the period ahead.

At a summary level therefore, the key strategic objectives are:-

- (i) To support the development of strong urban centres for Portlaoise and the counties Towns and Villages
- (ii) To promote inward investment and enterprise in County Laois and to market the County on a global and national market
- (iii) To support the development of agri-business and the rural economy
- (iv) To support the development of tourism ( including a new tourism development strategy), recreation tourism and the arts
- (v) To support the development of job creation , work skills and continuous education and training
- (vi) To support the development of rural broadband, ICT and rural micro enterprises

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

The sterling 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 2016.

The link between upkeep, tidiness, presentation of places and economic activity is very important and cannot be over emphasised. It is proposed, subject to funding, that work will commence on town and village enhancements in Portarlington, Mountrath, Ballyroan, Ballinakill and Donoghmore in 2017 and that improvement works currently underway at Clonminan Business Park will be completed in early 2017.

A sum of €506,000 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 2017.

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

The population of Portlaoise is estimated to be now nearing 23,000 and is home to roughly one quarter of the population of the County. Given the recent rate of growth it is quite feasible that the town will reach a population of 25,000 in the short term. It is appropriate therefore that a strategic view be taken as to how the urban core of Portlaoise is to function in the period ahead, how the town will present itself for business investment , social and cultural use and how as the driver of economic activity in the County, it manages to make an impression for visitors and local residents as a place to live and work. Notwithstanding the progress currently in hand in developing a new Masterplan for the town centre the council will;

- (i) 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 ,
- (ii) pursue solutions for urban renewal and urban dereliction through identifying EU and other funding opportunities
- (iii) 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.

It is expected that a new Vision Statement / Masterplan will be before the members in early 2017 for consideration prior to the making of the Statutory County Development Plan 2017 to 2023.

As such the Masterplan 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 a central element and driver of Laois and the regional and national economy. Notwithstanding recent trends and price fluctuations since the abolition of the quota in the spring of 2015, milk production still presents an enormous economic development opportunity for farmers and for the entire agri business and rural community.

The proposal to bring high speed broadband to rural communities commencing in 2017 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 Communications, Climate Action and Energy to facilitate the delivery of such infrastructure. Laois Co Council through its environment Department will also assist and advise as to the necessary programme of measures necessary for good farm management and environmental protection.

In addition 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.

### **Tourism, Recreation and the Arts**

The importance of tourism and hospitality as a driver of economic activity in Laois is central to the policy decision making role of Laois County Council. It is encouraging to note that tourist interests including Fáilte Ireland have acknowledged the role of Heritage in a modern tourism market and it is now a requirement that Laois County Council and all stakeholders work towards sustaining and creating jobs under the “Ancient East” initiative.

Nonetheless the challenge is to maximise the potential to attract even greater number of visitors to all parts of the County, to build on the success of the National Ploughing Championships, Electric Picnic and other landmark events and to transform the visitor experience in Laois. A provision is made in Budget 2017 in respect of supporting this objective and to continue to support a strong arts programme.

### **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 Portarlinton 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 2017 to update the skills database for Co Laois to match it to employers requirements and to encourage the 10,000 people that commute to work outside County Laois every day to use the new database.

### **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 8 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 provides for the establishment of the National Oversight and Audit Commission to examine local government performance. The Commission visited Laois County Council during the summer of 2016 and undertook a verification process on the Council's performance indicators. 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, Community 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.

### **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 and Brendan Phelan.

The SPCs are an important part of the Councils policy development process and they dealt with a very significant range of policy matters during 2015.

### **Municipal District Committees**

The Council's three district committees of Borris in Ossory/Mountmellick, Portlaoise and Graiguecullen/Portarlinton under the current Chairmanships of Cllrs John King, John Joe Fennelly and Paschal Mc Evoy, 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 2016.

### **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 2017 to 2019**

The elected members will consider a revised three year capital programme at the statutory Budget meeting of the Council. The draft revenue budget 2017 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 €38.31 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 2016 just over €475,000 in development charges has been collected. The current development levy scheme will be reviewed and considered by the members early in 2017.

### **Conclusion**

I wish to thank all the members of the Council, Cathaoirleach Cllr. Tom Mulhall and his predecessor Cllr. Catherine Fitzgerald 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 2016 and to remember all those associated with the Council who have 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 2017 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 the Finance and Human Resource Departments for their assistance in preparing the 2017 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 €64.63 be increased by 3% to €66.57 in respect of the financial year 2017 and subject to the provision that an incentive is provided for those ratepayers with annual rates under €6,000 per annum..**

Mise le meas,

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**John Mulholland**  
**Chief Executive**

**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:

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

**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 in 2014 associated with the Local Primary and Local Tertiary Network.

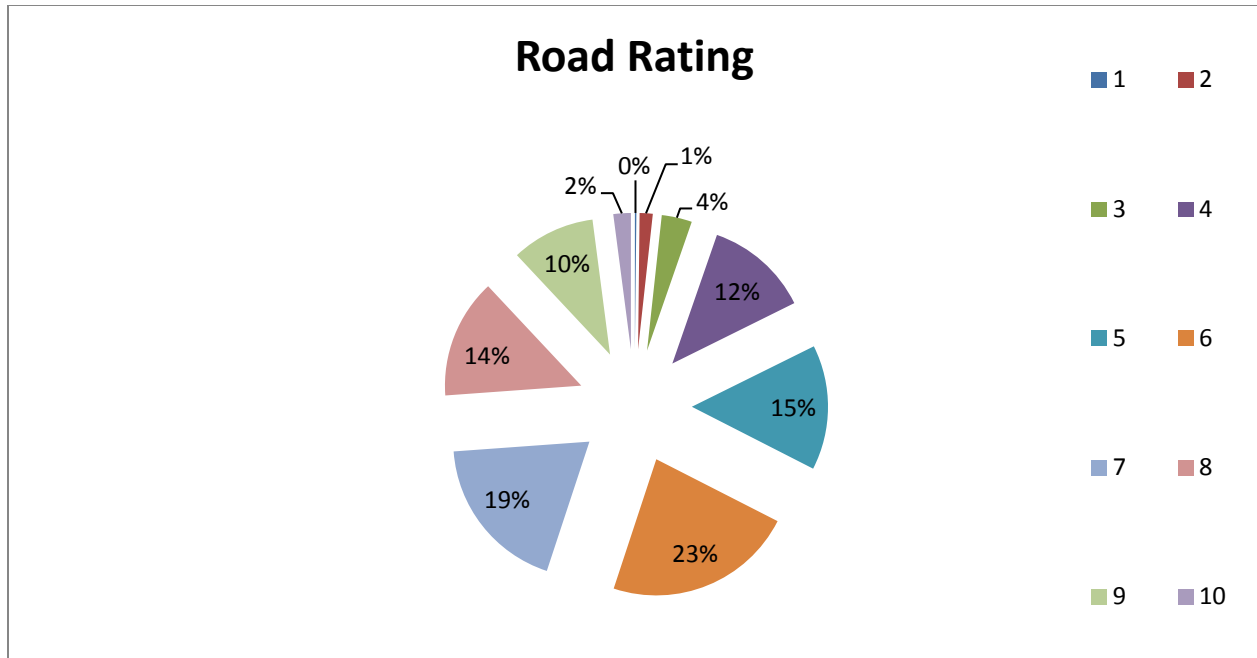
Ratings can be described as:

- 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.

|                      | <b>Rating 1-4</b> | <b>Rating 5-6</b> | <b>Rating 7-10</b> |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 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**

#### **2016 Budget Allocation & 2017 Planned Works**

The following points are worthy of note:

- 2016 Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) Grants for National Road Improvement and Maintenance total € 1,144,438 compared to € 609,267 in 2015, a €535,171 increase primarily as a result of the €500,000 allocation to the N80 Maidenhead Realignment Scheme. It is hoped that we would receive at least a similar allocation for 2017 in relation to improvement and maintenance.
- Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport grant allocations for the Non-National Road Network total € 6,421,228 as compared to € 6,495,949 in 2015, a € 74,721 reduction. Allocations for 2017 are expected to be similar to 2016.
- Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport grant tranche 1 allocations for Storm Events total € 1,800,000 as compared to € 600,000 in 2015. This was a one-off allocation and we will not be receiving such funding in 2017.
- Laois County Council own funds are provided under our County Roads Maintenance heading, 2016's allocation is €920,000 as opposed to €850,000 in 2015 a €70,000 or 8% increase. A further increase of €80,000 is proposed for 2017 in order to maintain current levels of service provision.

- Laois County Council own funds of €250,000 are allocated to the provision of the upgrade of roundabouts in Portlaoise town and this will remain in 2017.
  - 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 2017 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 6 locations and are proving very effective in as a road safety measure.
  - 8 no. Low Cost Safety Improvement Schemes with an allocation of €270,000 were completed in 2016 and we would hope to carry out a similar number in 2017, with works including improvement in road & junction geometry, signage and traffic calming measures.
- 
- In September 2015, completion of 750m missing link between Abbeyleix Road & Timahoe Road, the Portlaoise Southern Circular Route was identified for funding under Government's Capital Programme 2016 – 2021. Part VIII Planning Approval Granted by LCC in July 2016 and CPO preparation, detailed design and surveys is underway. Subject to DTTaS funding this scheme could commence in 2017.
  - The N80 Maidenhead Realignment Scheme incorporates 2km of the N80 being realigned near Arles to remove series of bends. The CPO became operative on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2016, ABP approved the scheme on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2016 and the Notice to Treat documentation was served on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2016. It is our aim to have the scheme shovel ready during Q1 2017 pending availability of TII Funding with a scheme cost estimate of €4.5million

Bridge Improvement Works are funded under DTTAS Specific Improvement Grant of €200k. We have made an application for similar funding for 2017.

### **Laois County Fire & Rescue Service**

With 8 Fire Stations and total numbers at 81 across all ranks we will continue to maintain and improve our service to the public. Work will advance on version 11 of our Major Emergency plan incorporating other National plans as required.

### **Civil Defence**

We received substantial support from the Department of Defence Capital Allocations in 2016 including a Replacement Jeep - €20,000, New Ambulance & Conversion Cost - €34,000, a vehicle for our Dog Unit - €12,750 and a Search Drone (1 of 8 supported Nationally) - €8,000

## **Planning Development and Control**

### **County Development Plan 2017-2025**

The Draft Laois County Development Plan 2017 -2025 was approved for public display at the July Council meeting. The Draft County Development Plan made public on the 5<sup>th</sup> August 2016 with a closing date for of submissions 17<sup>th</sup> November 2016. Public consultation meetings were held around the County. We should be in a position to adopt the new CDP in mid 2017.

Works will commence on the preparation of the revised Local Area Plans for Portlaoise, Portarlington, Mountmellick and Graiguecullen in 2017.

### **Portlaoise Public Realm Plan**



GVA BilFinger and consultants were commissioned to carry out a Public Realm Plan and Vision Statement for Portlaoise town. The first public meeting was held in the Heritage Hotel on Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> September 2016 and was attended by approx 100 people. A further public meeting was held in October 2016 and we anticipate a plan to be available in Q1 2017. This plan will designate key urban areas for enhancement, and will endeavour to improve the overall viability and attractiveness of the core town centre.

### **Unfinished Housing Estates**

It is expected that 13 estates will have been taken in charge by the end of 2016. It is anticipated that the Council will bring forward a similar number in 2017 for taking in charge.

### **Heritage**

As part of the decade of commemorations the Council plans to identify certain initiatives around Laois people who served in World War 1.

### **Economic Development**

The Laois Local Economic and Community Plan 2016-2021 was adopted at the Council meeting on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2016. We will continue to implement the objectives of the LECP for 2017.

### **Marketing Strategy for County Laois**

Marketing Consultants – Strategem iLabs - have been appointed to develop 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 will research and prepare 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

- 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
- 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.

It is planned to launch our Marketing Strategy early in 2017 and to recognize businesses and entrepreneurs in Laois for their achievements in their sector.

### **Local Enterprise Office**

The LEO will continue to offer its range of supports to the business sector in Laois. The amalgamation 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**

**Community Development**

Laois County Council's role in community development has changed significantly in recent times and this year in particular was a year of firsts. The first Local Economic and Community Plan for Laois was developed and adopted. Laois LCDC successfully entered into its first Service Level Agreement with Laois Partnership Company and Laois County Council for the delivery of the LEADER Programme in Laois. Laois Public Participation Network engaged its first Support Worker. The first Age Friendly Alliance in Laois was formed and as a result and the Laois Age Friendly Strategy 2016 – 2021 was compiled.

There are two key objectives for 2017, delivery of the commitments in the LECP 2016 – 2021 and the successful delivery by Laois LCDC of the Laois Local Development Strategy through the management of the LEADER Programme in Laois.

### **Supports for Communities:**

In 2016 over 190 individual groups were assisted by Laois County Council in community areas such as Tidy Towns, Local Agenda 21, Residents' Associations, Arts Groups, Festivals and Cemetery Committees. This is in addition to the 47 groups assisted under the Community Project Funds under the Municipal Districts' allocations.

### **Arts Office**

2016 was a very successful year in Laois Arts with the delivery of a wide range of programmes and events including the Artists-in-Schools programme, Bealtaine Festival, Summer Arts Programme and Leaves Literary Festival. The James Fintan Lalor School was very successful in 2016 and included The Journey, a performance of highlights from the 2016 commemorative programme, and exhibition of memorabilia curated by Brendon Deacy, Soap Boxes and political debates.

Laois Arthouse, Stradbally programme included a packed exhibition programme with 6 exhibition openings and a series of artists talks for the community, including the launch of Plein Air Catalogue and Film documenting outdoor art workshops and an exhibition led by artist Jock Nichol.

Music Generation Laois(MG) had over 3000 participants in 2016. The New Works Series featured 3 new collaborative compositions for Harp ensemble, Trad Orchestra, Youth Orchestra and Choir premiering at a large-scale concert in May. MG Laois represented Music Generation in New York, and have travelled to Spain to perform at the Catalonia Connexions Festival. In addition, the Laois School of Music: Enrolment of over 300 students, have expanded the Laois School of Music Youth Orchestras.

### **Tourism**

Through support provided by Laois County Council, 2016 saw a wide range of festivals and events in Laois including The Old Fort Quarter Festival Portlaoise, the world renowned Electric Picnic, Laois International Golf Challenge, Laois Heartland Rally, the Gordon Bennett Classic Car Run & the Laois Audio Guides. Through a revitalised Laois Tourism CLG it is expected that a new Tourism Development Strategy 2017 – 2022 will be developed in early 2017.

### **Sports**

Laois enjoys an excellent network of leisure facilities including two leisure centres and twenty community play facilities. Through significant capital investment in 2016, this was further enhanced with the development of a new skate park in Portlaoise and installation of floodlights at Portlaoise Athletic Track. In addition, Portlaoise and Portarlington leisure centres continued to deliver excellent service to the people of Laois retaining their Irish-Leisure Industry Gold Standard. Early 2017, will see the refurbishment of the playground at the Portlaoise Leisure Centre and the official opening of the new skate park and playground. In partnership with the FAI, GAA and Leinster Rugby, the Sports Section delivered a wide range of community sports programmes countywide. In early 2017, we will be re-visiting our Memoranda of Understanding with the F.A.I., G.A.A. & Leinster Rugby.

### **Environment**

2016 has been a busy year for the staff of the environment section involved in waste enforcement and litter management. In addition to a wide range of enforcement activities,

Laois County Council launched a number of community campaigns including Clean Up Laois Week and Reuse Month in 2016. A public awareness campaign on illegal dumping and litter control was delivered through the local press in July this year. Significant progress was made in 2016 by the 20 Local Tidy Towns groups in Laois that submitted applications to the National competition. In all there were 5 medal winners: Abbeyleix, Ballacolla, Castletown, Clonaslee and Portlaoise. Abbeyleix was just 3 points off the national winner (Skerries) and 1 point away from National Tidy Small Town award (Listowel). On another positive note, the performance by Portlaoise in the IBAL (Irish Business Against Litter) ranking should be noted with the town moving up 16 places to 21<sup>st</sup> position and achieving 'Clean to European norms' standard. It is expected that 2017 will see greater use of mobile CCTV in waste enforcement, building on the success of the pilot commenced this year. A substantial refurbishment of the Civic Amenity site at Kyletalesha is also planned for 2017 that will see a significant improvement in customer service in the facility. However waste management costs are increasing, with reduced prices internationally for recyclables and constrained national capacity for residual wastes; therefore it will be necessary to adjust gate prices at our waste reception facilities during the year in order to stay compliant with the polluter pays principle for waste costing.

### **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, under an excluded provision in the Act, remains the Water Services Authority in connection with Group Schemes (GWS) and domestic wastewater treatment systems (septic tanks). Funding is provided each year to administer the Rural Water Programme and to provide advice and support to GWS in the County to maintain a high quality water supply in line with the EU drinking water quality standards. The total Rural Water expenditure for 2016 is expected to exceed €500,000 based on Departmental allocations.

Staff in the Rural Water Section will also continue to process applications for provision of upgrades to domestic wells. All grants and subsidy payments will be recouped from the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government

I am pleased to advise that Laois County Council's Water Services Laboratory was successful in its application to INAB for accreditation to ISO 17025 for drinking water check parameters plus nitrates. The Laboratory will continue provide a quality service to IW under the SLA and will carry out test analysis for GWS, Small Private Supplies (for public use) and landfill monitoring. It is proposed to replace the LABinfo system, (which is no longer supported) with LabWorks, which will comply with accreditation requirements.

Laois County Council Environmental Protection staff will continue to be involved in the implementation of legislation and policy regarding river water and groundwater quality, air quality and noise pollution as they apply in 2017.

## **Human Resources**

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

### **1. Recruitment**

18 open recruitment competitions have been held over the last year, and 10 confined competitions. This resulted in a total of 706 applications received, with 566 candidates being called to interview (including shortlisting interviews). A total of 49 appointments were made over the last 12 months.

### **2. Gateway**

The Council supported the Gateway Programme during 2016 with a maximum employment of 35 Gateway personnel. The Scheme has made a significant contribution in terms of environmental enhancement works throughout County

Laois. Recruitment to this Scheme has now ceased and existing contracts will expire on varying dates over the next year and a half.

### **3. Summer Student Placement Programme**

The Council advertised the above programme in 2016 and a total of 20 students were employed during the Summer months. 8 of these students were assigned to environmental enhancement works in Portlaoise 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 2017.

### **Corporate Affairs**

#### **Laois Garden of Remembrance**

A memorial garden was created to commemorate the signatories of the Proclamation of the Republic, at Aras an Chontae, Portlaoise.

The Laois Garden of Remembrance is also to commemorate the activities of the Laois Volunteers at Easter 1916 and the influence on the signatories of the Laois-born patriot and writer, James Fintan Lalor, whose statue stands outside County Hall. The Garden was formally opened at an unveiling ceremony on 12<sup>th</sup> May, 2016, with invited guests and a ceremonial flag raising ceremony attended by representatives of the Defence Force.

#### **1916 Commemoration Programme**

2016 was an important year in the library service as we commemorated the 1916 Easter Rising. It was an opportunity for the branch libraries to promote the history and literature of the period by organising / hosting events around the topic. These included:

- A series of lectures by well known historians including Maurice O'Keeffe, Michael Wrafter & Jim Fleming
- A travelling exhibition detailing the national story and the story of Laois at this time
- Conradh na Gaeilge exhibition
- Procurement of Oral History collection

- Córanearraigh (Maureen Culleton & Laois Active Retirement Group singing songs from 1916)

### **The Library Service**

The Library Service continues to play a pivotal role for all communities in Co. Laois and offers an efficient frontline service for all members providing them with access to books, media, online services and internet/wifi. This year has already seen a 22 % increase in membership and total visits to the library are on target to exceed 200,000 visits for the year. .

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.

### **Library Service Development**

In keeping with the national strategy for libraries “Opportunities for All”, a number of initiatives advanced in 2016 particularly the shared countrywide Library Management System. Data migration has commenced in Laois and the crossover will be fully realised by March 2017. This new shared catalogue has improved a range of services for members and has standardised library privileges, fines and charges nationwide while abolishing membership fees.

The library service has also participated in the national procurement project introducing e-books, e-magazines, e-audio books and e-learning programmes to library members nationwide. This new Ebooks service was funded from library resources to allow for Laois customers to avail of this facility free of charge.

### **Summer Reading Challenge**



Laois County Library Service organised a summer reading challenge and this year we participated in the national Summer Reading Programme. 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.

## **Capital Development**

### **Portarlington Library**

A fully refurbished Portarlington Library reopened to the public in February of this year. It has  
Membership has more than doubled to 3255 registrations to date in Portarlington ; at current usage levels this library will have issued over 60,000 items since the reopening. The introduction of RFID tags means transactions are much smoother, with members free to use the  
self-check machines if they wish to. The public computer usage at the library has been steadily increasing with 504 computer sessions recorded at this branch for September.

### **Portlaoise Library**

Capital funding has been secured for the development of the former Shaws building on Main Street, Portlaoise. MCOH Associates were appointed architects for the project in October this year.

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

The new Incremental Purchase Scheme came into effect from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2016 and is available to eligible tenants.

Stage 1 approval has been received from the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in the sum of €1,761,943 for the construction of 10 houses at Ballyroan.

“Rebuilding Ireland” – An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness was published by the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Mr Simon Coveney on the 19<sup>th</sup> July 2016. This Council is preparing a revised housing programme for the period 2017 – 2020.

Stage 1 approval has been received from the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government for the construction of 20 houses at Ballymorris Road, Portarlinton.

Work commenced on the construction of 33 houses at Conniberry Way, Portlaoise. The “sod turning” ceremony attended by the Cathaoirleach, Minister for Housing, Planning,

Community and Local Government, Mr Simon Coveney, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr Charlie Flanagan and elected members took place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2016.

The Housing Needs Assessment 2016 has been completed and the summary submitted to the Department for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government on the 19<sup>th</sup> October 2016. There are 1,302 applicants on the list for social housing.

The Housing Assistance Payments Programme will be rolled out in County Laois in December 2016.

Plans for the construction of houses at Mountmellick, Mountrath and Rathdowney are being prepared.

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

A new version of the Laois County Council corporate Website – [www.laois.ie](http://www.laois.ie) will go live later this month. The new website will feature a significantly revised layout making it easier to navigate and understand for users of all ages. The new site is designed with mobile internet usage in mind and will be accessible on any device such as a desktop, mobile or tablet. It will also feature BrowseAloud software making it fully assessable to users with reading issues or other difficulties.

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