

Submission to the
NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK

“Ireland 2040 – Our Plan”

on behalf of

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Laois County Council requests that the National Planning Framework looks at the Zone of influence of each of the towns within the Midland Region Special Planning Area and beyond, and having examined that, put in place a structure to ensure that Portlaoise and County Laois is best served under any future national and regional strategies. The critical Strategic issues to be addressed are as follows: -

- *Ensuring Good environmental standards are met across the Country*
- *The Creation of Jobs and employment zones within the Country to counteract unsustainable growth patterns and commuting patterns*
- *Investment in our Social Infrastructure*
- *Creation of Tourist Initiatives to sustain Rural Ireland*
- *Infrastructural requirements for the future growth of the economy*

At a National Level the following specific actions are requested:

- Acknowledge the role that County Towns have within regions or interlinking regions where they have a clear defined purpose and the necessary infrastructure in place to allow for appropriate development up to 2040;
- Ensure that there is maximum Coordination between agencies in relation to making counties sustainable in terms of aligning job creation with where people have chosen to live and promote places for this purpose;
- Ensure that there is maximum Coordination between agencies in relation to proactively encouraging investment in public infrastructure which will lead our society to being more sustainable and more socially inclusive;
- Ensure high end objectives reflective of the needs of our society in terms of older people and young people;
- Ensure that the National Planning Framework is informed by the infrastructural requirements to allow for the development of “City Regions” particularly with regard to the energy requirements and the potential for flood risk;
- Promote the creation of low carbon town centres;
- Clearly identify the role/ value of the rural landscape within the National Planning Framework ;
- Identify the natural assets and areas of Environmental importance and provide clear policies for their protection and enhancement.

In regard to the urgently needed interventions for County Laois within the EMRA region, the following needs to be addressed :-

- Given that Portlaoise lies within a 60 minute “Zone of influence” from Dublin City, Limerick City, Waterford City, the town of Portlaoise should be given a designation reflective of the “Inland Port” but renamed “**Prime Urban Centre**”;
- Ensure that the lands zoned at Togher "inland port" within the National Spatial Strategy 2002 and further developed into a masterplan endorsed by TII and the Dept of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in 2010 continue to be considered for economic purposes given the centrality of Laois at the cross roads of Ireland on the M7/M8;

- Further expand the Vision statement and Public realm Strategy for Portlaoise by supporting the low carbon emphasis for a town centre management strategy;
- Continue to work jointly with neighbouring local Authorities in reviewing the *Joint Portarlington Local Area Plan 2012-2018* and the *Joint Spatial Plan for the Greater Carlow Graiguecullen Urban Area 2012-2018* and seek their replacement with Joint Local Area Plans in the interests of efficiency, proper planning and sustainable development
- To priorities the Slieve Bloom Mountains as an “National Recreational Eco Park” in conjunction with the neighbouring Local Authority of Offaly County Council;
- To continue the programme of Greenway and Blueway development across regions which would benefit the rural towns and villages of each county;
- To prioritise and develop the natural amenities within the county such as the Slieve Bloom Mountains, the Barrow Blueway, Abbeyleix Bog for recreational and amenity pursuits which would connect into the overall development of an “Eco amenity zone” relating to the mountains, peatlands and waterways of the Midland SPA;
- To create an events destination in County Laois , building on the success of hosting international and national events such as the Electric Picnic in Stradbally and the National Ploughing Competition in Ratheniska.

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday 2nd March 2017, the 1st consultation phase for Ireland 20140 – Our Plan was launched by An Taoiseach Enda Kenny. This plan will be the successor to the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) which was introduced in 2002 as Ireland's first long term strategic spatial planning strategy.

In the 15 years since 2002 Ireland's population has grown by 44% however that population growth has not occurred completely in accordance with the plans set out in the NSS. In fact none of the top 20 fastest growing towns in this period were designated as either Hubs or Gateways in the NSS.

This submission will chart the increased growth in Laois and its County Town Portlaoise in this period and will identify the state investment in County Laois over the last 15 years as well.

An evidenced based approach will be utilised to demonstrate the potential and indeed the requirement on foot of such state support for Portlaoise to continue to grow at acceptable/appropriate rates in order to achieve a clear identity within the National Planning Framework.

The review of the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and invitation for suggestions to inform a new ***“National Planning Framework for Ireland up to 2040”*** which commenced consultation on the 2nd February 2017 brings about an exciting opportunity to proactively have a say in how we see our country grow over the next 23 years.

While it would be preferential to leave our county colours to one side in deciding how we would like to see Ireland grow, it would be remiss to not make suggestion as to how our county would contribute to Irelands long term sustainability over the next 20 plus years.

Each county has in their own way much to offer. Every community has been increasingly empowered through legislative changes over the past 10 years. A joined up approach to the delivery of services is now stronger than it ever was and can be seen in the new Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP), Active Age strategies, public Participation Networks (PPN's), Local Community Development Committees (LCDC's), etc layered on top of the spatial County Development Plan and Local Area Plan processes.

Strategic Choices at National and Local Level

In the period since the publication of the National Spatial Strategy, Ireland has experienced a major economic boom followed by a major economic crash. Both boom and crash have tested the spatial planning policies in contrasting ways. On the basis of evidence accrued over the fifteen year period 2002 – 2017, it is apparent that however well intentioned the NSS it was the market nonetheless that largely dictated settlement patterns.

Settlement patterns and future spatial development will remain strongly linked to financial factors such as home affordability, disposable income and availability of secure employment. It is contended that despite the best efforts of a new NPF to encourage population growth to align in an orderly way with proximity to services that pressure on house prices and the cost of accommodation may in fact derail the implementation of a well considered spatial strategy.

Accordingly, the real choices facing the Country and Laois County Council pertain more relevantly to the availability of work in close proximity or within a reasonable proximity to housing.

In giving expression to the above it is not a choice for people to work in Dublin and live in low cost housing areas in the midlands. It is a financially induced reflex rather than a decision based on sense of place or sense of belonging to community.

Choices for Laois

Laois County experienced by far the greatest rate of population growth of all Counties during the intercensal period 2006 – 2016. At 26.5% the increase speaks loudly to the phenomenon of jobs in Dublin and housing on the fringe of the commuter belt. It is a trend that cannot be sustained under a number of headings including quality of life, health and environment. It also has had an adverse impact on the capacity of the M7/N7 network in a relatively short space of time and has served to limit the value of the state's investment therein. It would be reasonable to assume that the population of Co Laois would increase by at least 17,000 by 2040 bringing the county's population to in excess of 100,000. Therefore there must be a reasonable expectation of the future resident population to choose to work in their County or within the region,

Laois County Council submits that a choice can be made to reverse this trend and to reduce the numbers (10,000 in 2016) travelling on a daily basis for work outside the County by planning for jobs in the regions and in the County of Laois. Furthermore, it is certain that the cost of businesses will reduce should that choice be made and that in so doing Ireland would become a more cost competitive and sustainable Country.

Choices for Agriculture & Food Production

Laois remains an agricultural County. The dairy and beef sectors are of significant importance to the viability of rural towns and villages and hold the key to the progress and survival of the rural society and economy. The 'Food Wise 2025' Vision for growth in the Irish Agricultural Economy estimates an increase in agri-food exports by 18% by 2025. The NPF Ireland 2040 envisages a population increase in the state of 1 million.

Therefore, there are major choices facing agriculture and the rural economy. From the vantage point of 2017, the choices are relatively clear. These are that the state and the food producing community must choose:-

- (i) To engage in carbon efficient practices;
- (ii) To ensure practices that protect water resources and ecological status of water bodies in the state;
- (iii) To invest in more research and development in the sector particularly in the areas of pasture/forestry as carbon sinks and ensuring the image of Ireland and Laois as a Food Island of quality and assurance

The submission is laid out addressing the headline issues of the consultation document as follows

1. PEOPLES HEALTH AND WELL BEING

The needs of the ageing population have been well documented in Age Strategies which have been prepared by many Local Authorities. Whilst a lot of work has been done by local authorities and state bodies in relation to the provision of services for the elderly and this has been acknowledged through consultation processes that have been carried out in the preparation of the Laois Age Friendly Strategy 2016. The world's older population is increasing, with people living longer and healthier lives, and experiencing older age very differently from their grandparents' generation. Europe is the world's oldest region, with the older population expected to increase fivefold from 40 million to 219 million by 2050.

Ireland has also experienced an increase in overall life expectancy. It is predicted that there will be approximately 1.1 million people aged 65 years and older by 2036, an increase of almost 250% over the 2006 figure. The greatest increase is anticipated in the over 80 age group where the number is expected to quadruple from 110,000 to 440,000 in 2041.

County Laois is a relatively young county by comparison to other counties with 8,100 people over the age of 65. The 2011 CSO Census reported 10% of Laois's population over the age of 60. The highest percentage per population of this age group is concentrated in the south of the County. In many rural areas over 50% of the population is 65+

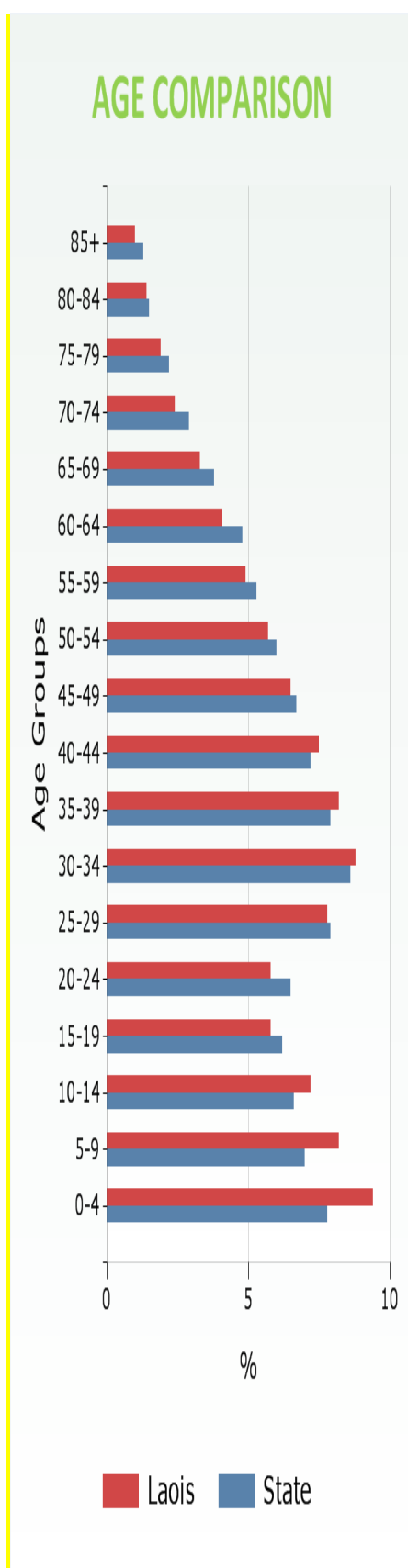
Reflecting the demographic change, the Government made a commitment to prepare a National Positive Ageing Strategy, which is now in its final stages to "better recognise the position of older people in Irish Society". The World Health Organisation (WHO) argues that if nations, societies and communities actively plan and respond now, we will be prepared to meet this challenge successfully. Simply, they articulate the positive ageing process, as a way of thinking and working, to: "optimise opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age".

The following are just some of the issues that arose during the course of consultation in relation to the Age Strategy for County Laois in 2015-2016 relevant in the context of the formation of the new National Planning Framework –

Recreation and Amenity

- Provision of walking infrastructure is important to older people

Transport



- Rural Transport and inter town public transport needs to be addressed to offer support to people living in very isolated areas
- The facilities provided at Railway Stations and linking bus and rail together needs to be addressed

Housing

- Sheltered Accommodation and housing for older people in close proximity to essential services should be provided
- There really needs to be a place where older people can come together for information, for company, for activities and more.

Other areas that need addressing that came to the forefront during the preparation of the LECP for County Laois in relation to the provision of social infrastructure necessary for the development of its citizens were as follows:

- Deliver sporting initiatives in Laois targeted at specific groups e.g. Young people at risk, traveller men, socially disadvantaged, substance abusers, older people;
- Roll out Go for Life Programme in Laois to involve a greater number of older people in sport and physical activity;
- Promote social inclusion through sports and physical activity initiatives e.g., Games on the Green, Teen Time;
- Run the Sports Inclusion Disability Programme promoting participation in sport and physical activity among people with disabilities;
- Provide drugs and alcohol abuse services, i.e., drugs and alcohol assessment treatment, rehabilitation and support services for adults and under 18 years old concerned with their own or another person's drug/alcohol use.

In terms of health and well being of the citizens of the country it is important that the following is acknowledged in the National Planning Framework –

Sporting organisations and the voluntary sector make a large contribution to society as they play an important role in the health and well being of our society and a contribution to the quality of life that make places attractive to live and/or bring up families within.

A big issue facing rural communities is that of rural isolation particularly for the elderly in our society, policy guidance in relation to the provision on sheltered accommodation within towns and villages should be considered within the National Planning Framework.

The importance of retaining healthcare facilities of which there are 4 public within County Laois – Portlaoise Regional Hospital, Abbeyleix, Mountmellick and Shaen within large population catchments is critical to the sustainability of the counties, regions and country as a whole. If services provided within these types of healthcare facilities are reduced or closed, it will put pressure on services outside the catchment thereby reversing the question of sustainability.

People will have to travel distances greater than they do now which will mean more private transport being used, more carbon emissions being produced all to the detriment of society

and our environment. In order to be sustainable the services need to be where people are living.

In terms of creating a sustainable community within each county in the country – connections should be made with the 3rd level institutions with regard to offering some courses within the county, similar to the Outreach programmes.

This would increase social inclusion measures relating to education for those that cannot afford to travel to Dublin or live full time in Dublin due to the lack of affordable residential units. Identifying Portlaoise as a option for this type of development should be considered.

2. A PLACE MAKING STRATEGY

- **Our Capitals Cities and Towns**

The National Spatial Strategy sought to address the contrast between the rapid development in the east of the Country and slower rates of development in other regions. To redress this imbalance, the Strategy identified Gateways and Hubs that had the capacity to support the stronger urban-rural structure needed to drive the development of these other regions.

The Gateways identified were centred around the main Cities within the Country, larger towns and a linked urban grouping. The Hubs identified in the Strategy differed substantially in terms of their size, location and development context. Some were strong County towns, others large towns closely linked to nearby Gateways. The definition of the concept behind the identification of the Hubs is unclear, however, they could all be classified under the term of an ‘urban hub’.

The result of the designation of these Urban Hubs has seen large County towns sidelined while smaller towns were designated. An example of this is that while Clonmel, Carlow, Navan, Naas, Portlaoise, and the non-county towns of Drogheda and Bray, were not mentioned, 11 towns with smaller populations were designated.

The more common identification of the most significant towns within a County is the County Town. Traditionally, County towns were the location of administrative and/or judicial functions, or established over time as the *de facto* main town of a county. They continue to offer opportunities to their County’s and their hinterlands in the areas of economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability.

There is a need to re-examine the role of the County Town, and in particular the larger County Towns, and the opportunities they offer, to ensure that their strengths are used to promote and implement Government policy in the areas of sustainability, balanced regional development, employment, protection of the environment, Smarter Travel, and value for money.

These County Towns need to be utilised as centres for economic regeneration and recovery for their Counties and hinterlands. The Government has invested heavily, either directly or indirectly, in these towns, across a broad spectrum of infrastructure and facilities, and every opportunity to maximise the return of this investment needs to be examined and facilitated.

County towns are a brand. Many reflect the names of the Counties in which they lie. They have the loyalty of the population of both the town and the County. They provide a focal point for tourism in many Counties, with strong Heritage and Cultural attractions and a variety of tourism accommodation.

These towns provide a base for tourists to explore a locality resulting in economic benefits to the area. They provide a quality of life which differs from that found within the large Cities and they offer opportunities not available in the cities also. They benefit from a wide hinterland which can provide the resources in the areas of food related industries, green energy, bio-industries and bio-technology, which will in coming years, open up new opportunities and challenges for these towns.

The position of County Towns (Prime Urban Centres) has been emphasised in the development of core strategies at local County Development Plan level where

- A clear population distribution policy for each County focusing on the County Town has been promoted ;
- Co-ordinated development has been encouraged through the identification of appropriate amounts of serviced residential, industrial and commercial land;
- A high quality transport infrastructure and transport system has been identified and invested in at National Level;
- Key assets have been identified , protected and enhanced through a range of land use policies;
- A range of policies have been embedded on the protection of the environment and natural and built heritage; and
- Key service infrastructure (water, wastewater, waste etc) has been identified and invested in at a national level.

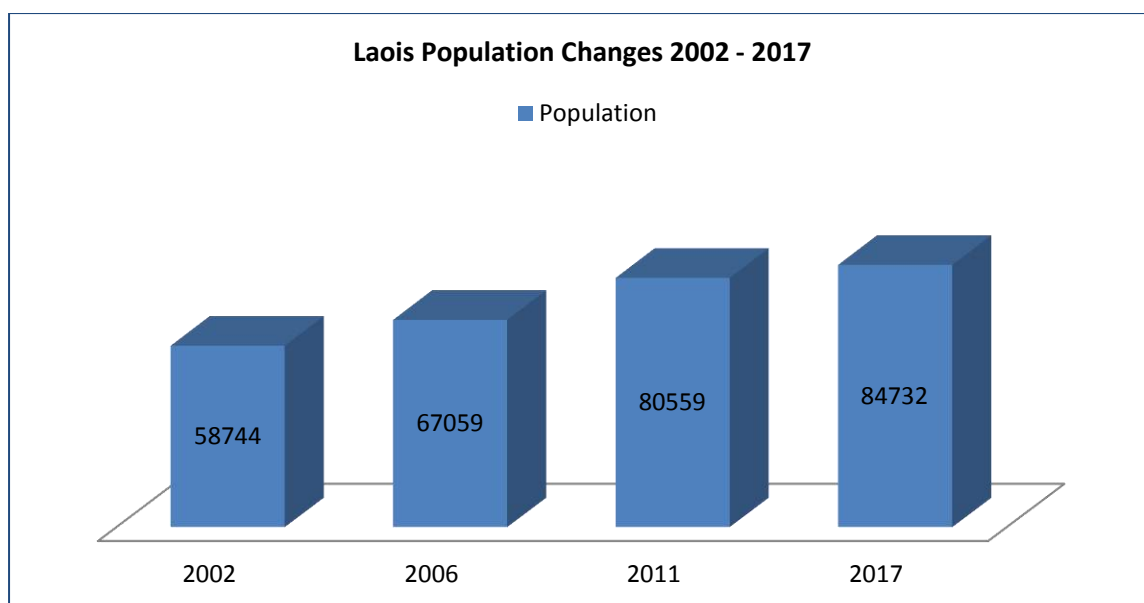
County towns should be well planned, attractive, economic drivers for their hinterland. Visions are required about what types of County towns are desirable to meet the challenges going forward in a sustainable manner, and to ensure social, economic and environmental prosperity for the Country as a whole. This requires strategies and planning at a national level to create and maintain high quality urban centres as a focal point for development at a local level.

County Towns have evolved, and can evolve further in a number of ways as :

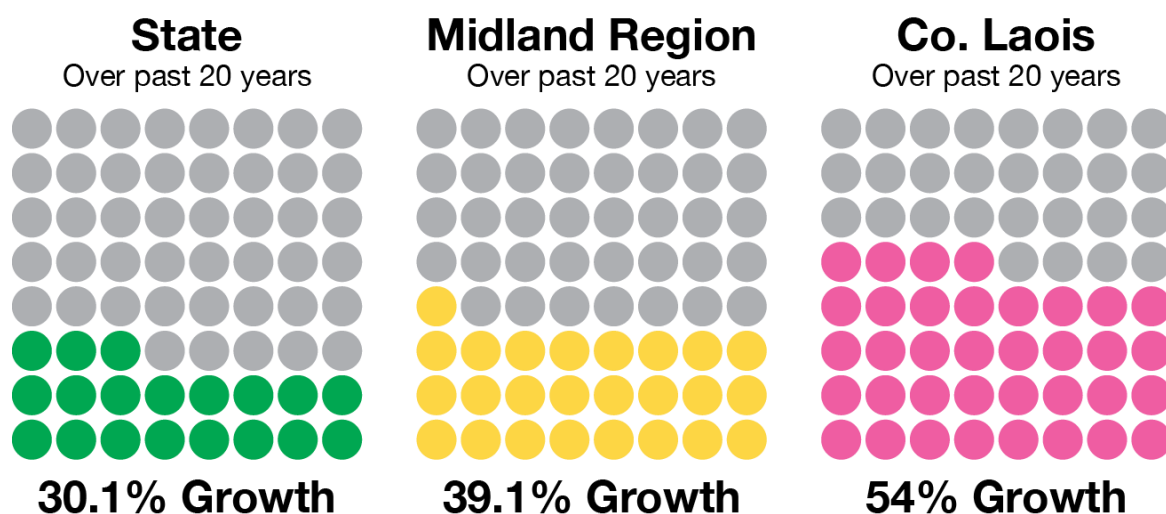
- *a support network for the City Region style development in terms of a social, administrative , etc context;*
- *economic drivers for their respective counties and regional hinterlands;*
- *growth centres which maximise the potential that new technology and green technology has to offer.*

How can County Laois fit into the National Spatial Framework and contribute to the viability of the Country upto 2040?

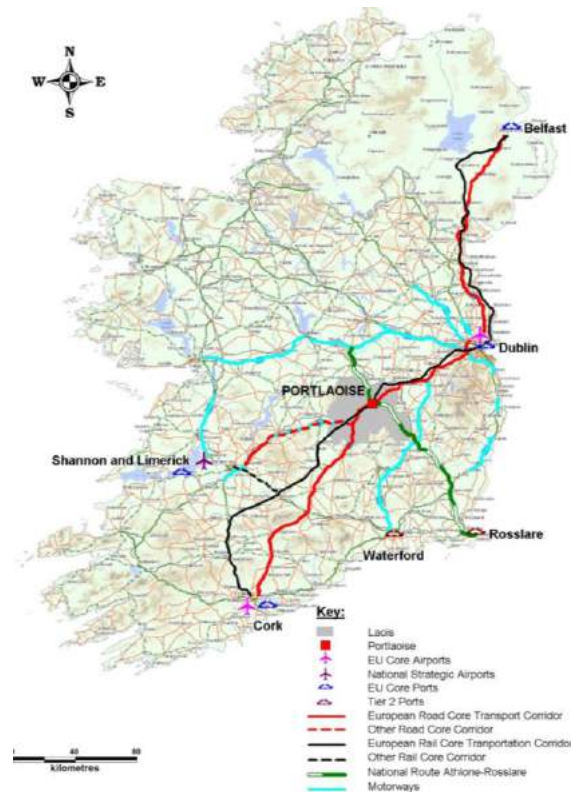
Laois is a rural county which has a steadily intensifying urban population - 84,732 people approx as per census 2016. Laois has the second highest rate of population growth in the State over the period. When the NSS was launched in 2002 the population of County Laois was 58,722 (Census 2002).The graph below highlights the population increases in Laois from the 2002 census to the 2016 census.



This is a 44% increase in 15 years. The population increase between 2006 and 2016 was 28% which was the highest population increase in the Country and 2.5 times the National average of 8.1%. The reason for much of this growth can be attributed to the availability of good quality affordable housing with excellent connectivity to centres of employment in North Kildare and Dublin City allowing commute times of circa 45 minutes by road and rail to these employment centres



People choose to live here for a number of reasons but mostly due to its proximity to the Greater Dublin Region and for ease of access by public transport or private transport to that region. Even with facilitating population growth within the County, the Local Authority has preserved the rural characteristics of the County particularly where there has been severe pressure in the north and east of the County. Further significant growth is anticipated.



The County's towns and villages have been organically grown and led to develop in a coherent manner and since the introduction of the first Core Strategy in the Laois County Development in 2011, much of the growth has now been refocused into Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Mountmellick and Graiguecullen – the 4 Local Area Plans towns within the county.

It should also be acknowledged that Joint Local Area plans have been adopted successfully with the neighbouring counties of Offaly (for Portarlinton LAP) and Carlow (for the Joint Spatial Plan for the Greater Carlow – Graiguecullen Urban Area).

Counties like Laois should not be penalised for their success in attracting people to come and live within them, the state has invested heavily in this success with almost €750 Million worth of infrastructure developed over the last 15 years.

The bulk of this investment has been in the Motorways through Laois (~€500 Million) along with substantial investment in water services infrastructure (~€120 Million) across the County but principally in Portlaoise Town.

There has also been substantial investment in School's infrastructure in the County, once again focused on Portlaoise with the development of 2 new secondary schools and 6 new primary schools and 2 new schools (1 primary & 1 Secondary) are currently going through initial planning stages.

Social infrastructure has been invested in as well with the development of 2 Leisure Centres (1 in Portlaoise, 1 in Portarlinton), 7 Libraries, 21 Playgrounds, 1 Arthouse.

A new Library for Portlaoise town is going through design stage with a state support grant of €1.6 Million committed.

This state investment supported by locally raised matching funds has been critical to support the doubling of our population as referenced above and ensuring an excellent Quality of Life for Laois citizens.

Our priorities are clear.... to be sustainable economically, socially and environmentally.

In the purest of terms, this means reversing the 10,000 commuters on a daily basis for work purposes, creating jobs within our own county , providing affordable, energy efficient homes in appropriate locations and ensuring access to primary, secondary and third level education, quality healthcare, while maintaining the natural and built environment.

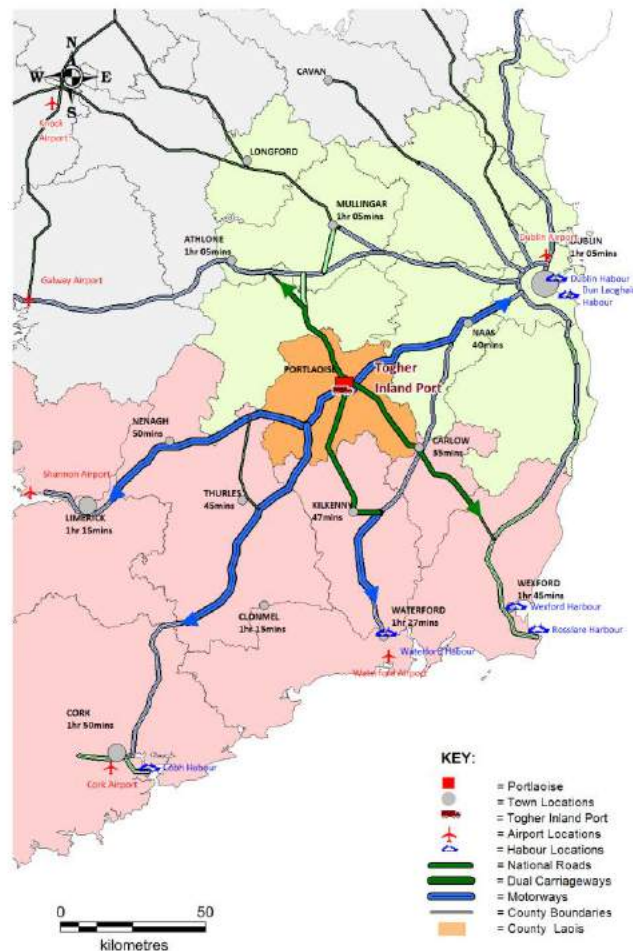
PORTLAOISE / COUNTY LAOIS in the 2040 context

Section 3.7 , National Spatial Strategy 2002 states in relation to Key infrastructure:

“Portlaoise is located near the intersection of the Dublin-Cork/Limerick ((N7/N8(now M7/M8)) roads, the cross country Mayo/Athlone/Rosslare (N80) road and three strategic rail corridors”.

Portlaoise town, because of its location at this convergence of motorways, National Routes and rail infrastructure is the obvious location for an Interregional Link between the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) and the major cities of Cork(M8) and Limerick(M7). The NSS had identified the potential for the development of an “Inland Port” at Portlaoise and we will identify the progress made on this concept and indeed the future potential for development of this concept in the NPF based upon the need for balanced regional economic development, the utilisation of existing infrastructure and the recognition of the need to maximise the use of environmentally sustainable transport modes.

The convergence of road and rail infrastructure referenced above allows for the development of a National logistics park, enterprise centre and conferencing and events facility in Portlaoise



Recent trends as indicated in the 2016 Census show a growth rate in the county and county town that has outstripped our neighbouring provincial towns of Tullamore, Mullingar and Carlow. The population of Portlaoise is estimated to currently be approximately 23,000 in 2016.

This will confirm Portlaoise as the largest town in the Midlands SPA of EMRA and will position it as comparable in size to Kilkenny, Carlow, Newbridge, Naas, Athlone and Navan and major population centres for the Leinster region.

Portlaoise should be considered in the National planning Framework as a “**Prime Urban Centre**” of Dublin. There are strong linkages between Dublin City and County Laois in terms of the Dublin educational institutions fulfilling the requirements of third level students and many businesses located within Dublin city and its hinterland providing jobs to people living in Laois. Over the past 20 years this relationship has developed into a two way relationship in so far as the people of the Dublin region have chosen to live in County Laois due to the affordable housing options and the quality of life – schools, recreational and amenity available.

The town has had the capacity to grow with investment in infrastructure without any direct impacts on the environment. Other towns are limited in this giving European designations, flood plain issues etc.

Proper planning and sustainable development will ensure that town centre management /revitalisation strategies are done for every town in Ireland pointing up where vacant and derelict properties can be brought back into use for residential use thereby increasing the function of every town to be more self sustainable .

Laois county council in 2016 commissioned such a strategy for the town centre of Portlaoise to reverse historic planning trends of movement away from the Main Street , declining residential use in the town centre, movement of education infrastructure from town centres to larger out of town sites, etc .

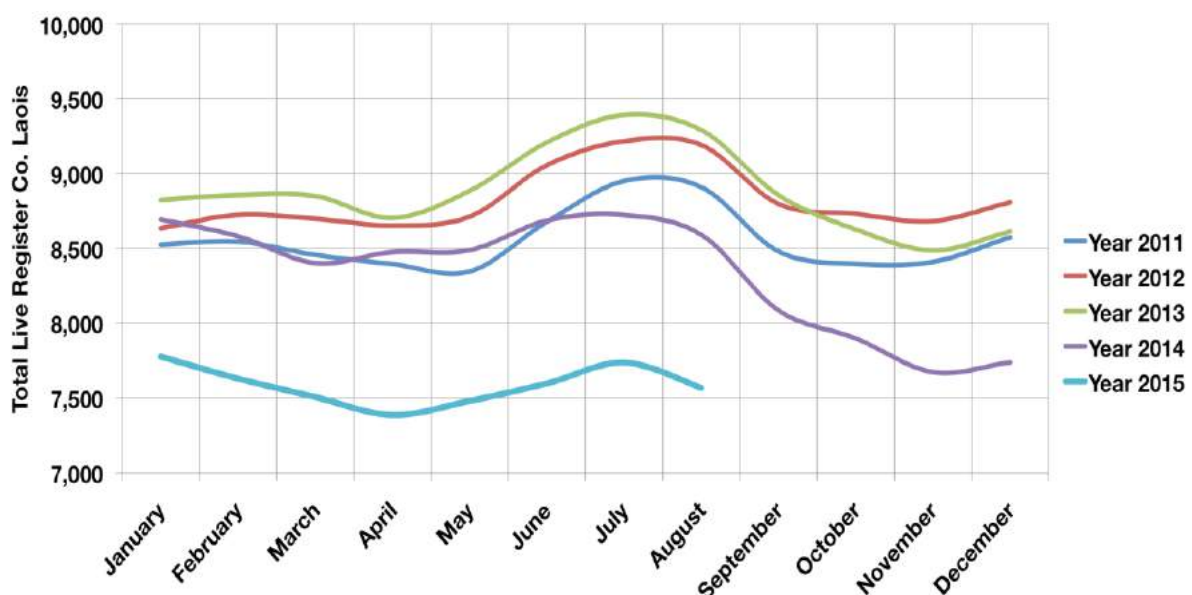
We have identified opportunity sites for the provision of residential use in the region of 2000 people and this will be dealt with by way of future local area plan policies and objectives.

Portlaoise has also the necessary infrastructure and appropriate zoning in place and opportunity to become a major player within the city region and its designation as a “**Prime Urban Centre**” within the Country must be acknowledged.

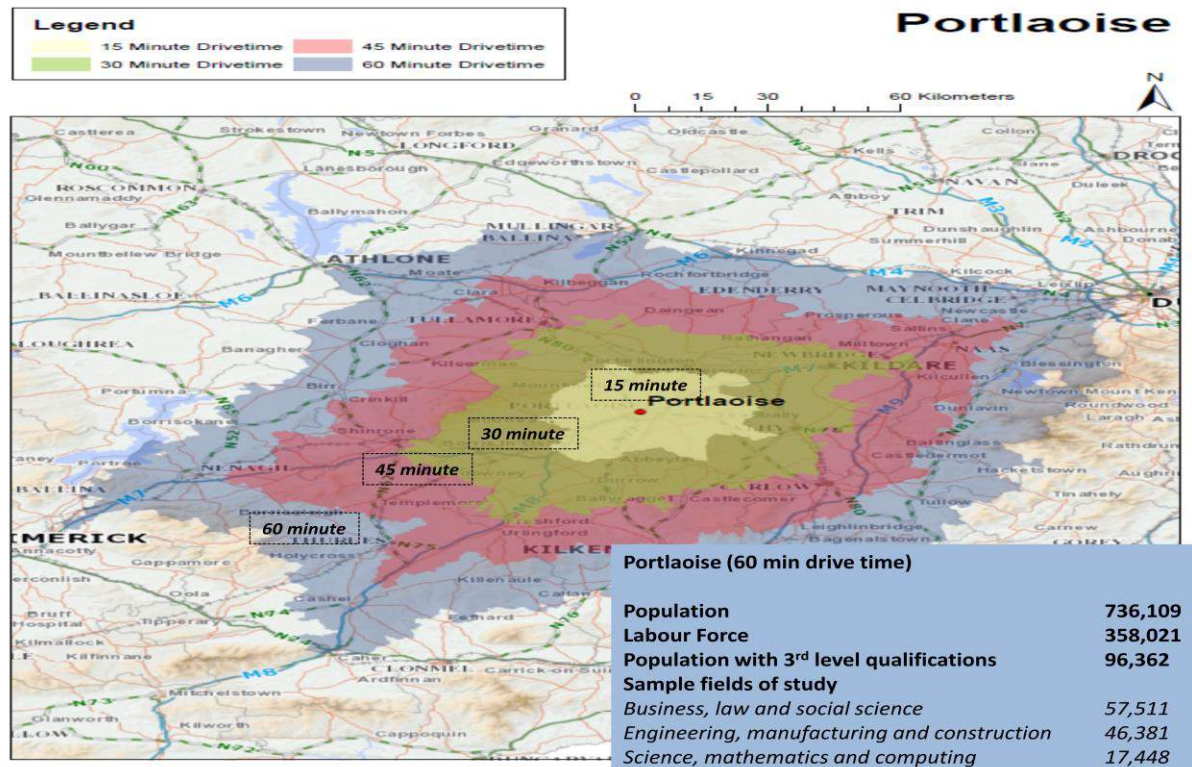
It has the capacity to further its economic profile within the Country with lands zoned for Enterprise and Employment in what is the “Inland Port” and a masterplan was done in 2010 in conjunction with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) and the Department of the Environment in this regard. The Local Authority is taking a proactive approach to putting in place the measures required to bring this land on line for economic uses for the betterment of the town, County and Country.

JOB CREATION

In 2011, the unemployment rates in individual EDs reached levels well above those prevailing county-wide, and were highest in Dangans (39.6% male, 28.6% female), followed by Doonane (40.6% male, 23.9% female) and Portlaoise (Maryborough) Urban (35.6% male, 25.4% female). Recovery in employment figures has been slower in Laois than the State average.



In creating jobs within our county it is of utmost importance that the town of Portlaoise be acknowledged as a driver for economic development both within the county and the Midlands Special Planning Area (SPA).



The most recent IBEC data set indicates that County Laois has high sectoral employment in both the public administration sector (9% compared to the national 6%) and agri sector (8% compared to the national 5%).

Laois County Council in partnership with the relevant agencies such as Laois LEO, Laois Partnership, Carlow IT, etc continues to work very hard to build an economic environment conducive to local entrepreneurs through

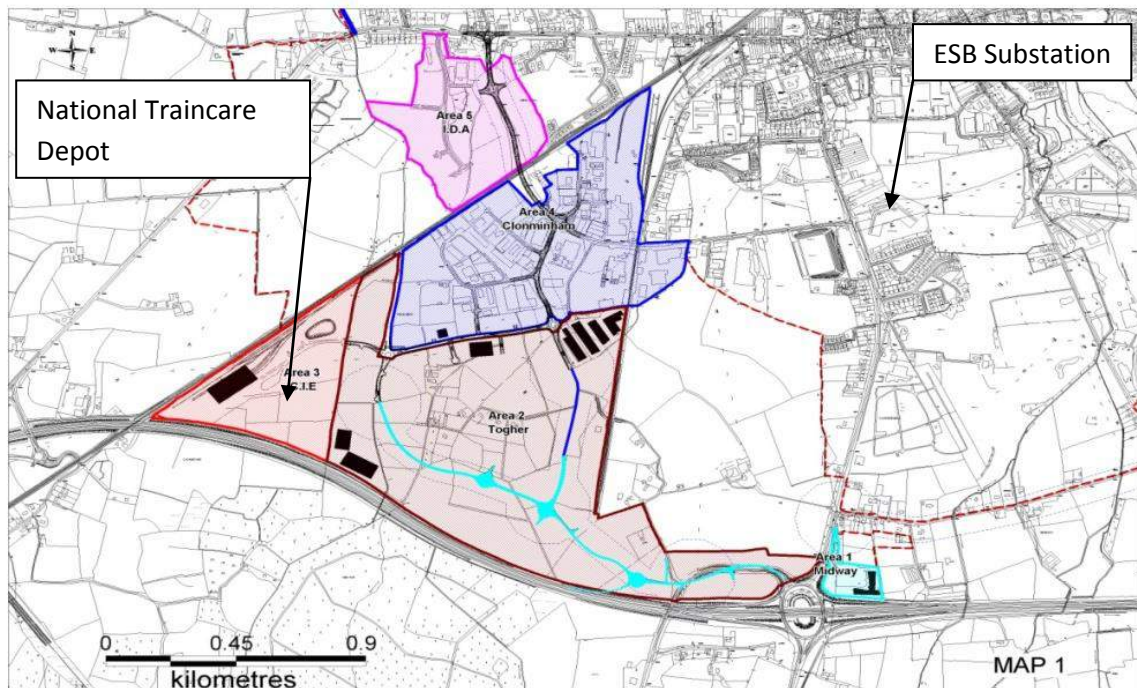
- start up businesses supported through Laois partnership and the Local Enterprise Office (LEO)/ EI / Carlow IT;
- Community Enterprise Centres in Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Mountmellick;
- Rural Enterprise Development Zones (REDZ) in Rathdowney and Portarlinton and in the area of “the business of food”.

In trying to attract international, national and Regional industry, lands zoned at Togher “inland port” must continue to be considered for economic purposes given the centrality of Laois at the cross roads of Ireland on the M7/M8 and National Rail lines.

In section 4.4, The Midlands Region the NSS states:

“Portlaoise, additionally, has strong National development potential as a transport hub and distribution centre or inland ‘port’ given its’ location on several national road and rail routes.”

Consequently Laois County Council developed a Master Plan for the development of such a hub/distribution centre/inland port. This master plan was subsequently adopted as part of the Portlaoise LAP in 2010 putting it on a statutory footing as referred to above.



In the last 10 years Laois County Council has invested ~€6 Million in developing the infrastructure for these lands with respect to wastewater, water and roads. The lands also have gas mains, a Metropolitan Area Network (MAN) for high-speed broadband and substantial electricity capacity at the location with the ESB substation for the region within 1Km of the site.

The lands are adjacent to Junction 17 on the M7 and are bounded to the north by the main Dublin to Cork/Limerick rail line. The National Traincare Depot is now operational on the site and this site has the potential to be utilised as a national logistics / distribution centre. In order to create a more sustainable freight transport model the rail connection from these lands to Dublin Port (through Phoenix park tunnel) of containers should be used for the transfer and distribution of container shipments.

Despite Laois' excellent transport links, good quality broadband, water and energy infrastructure, Portlaoise's designation as an *Inland Port* and other enabling planning policies, its low-cost base, its significant tourism assets and its location on Dublin's doorstep, the number of agency-supported (IDA/EI) enterprises in Laois is the lowest in the country and the number of overseas visitors to Laois remain low.

Key indicators

Indicator	Laois	Out of 31 LAs	Nat' Average	Highest	Lowest
Skills					
Participation rate (% LF)	63.6%	5	61.4%	Fingal (68.4%)	Cork City (54.4%)
Third level graduates (% LF)	26.3%	25	31.2%	DLR (55.1%)	Longford (24.1%)
STEM-related grads (% LF)	6.3%	22 (Joint)	7.3%	Galway City (10.8%)	Offaly/Wexford (5.1%)
Connectivity					
Broadband (% premises 2016)	58%	11/26 (Counties)	57%	Dublin (99%)	Roscommon (36%)
Minutes to state airport	62 (DUB)	14	62	Donegal (155)	Fingal (6)
Minutes to regional airport	84 (WAT)	17 (Joint)	76	Fingal (154)	Sligo (12)
Minutes to Tier 1 or 2 port	63 (D)	19	61	Donegal (163)	Cork City (6)
Road quality (IRI)	3.9	17	3.9	Mayo (5.2)	Louth (2.9)
Tourism					
Overseas € per 10,000 pop.	€2.12m	24/26 (Counties)	€6.40m	Galway (€18.37m)	Offaly (€1.69m)
Hotel beds	1,226	21/26 (Counties)	5,017	Dublin (41,816)	Longford (146)
Enterprise agencies and local government					
Commercial rates % budget	21.5%	5	36%	Fingal (54.2%)	Leitrim (16.2%)
IDA jobs per 10,000 (LF)	25	26/26 (Counties)	461	Cork (1,284)	Laois (25)
LEO jobs per 10,000 (LF)	117	22/30	197	Longford (534)	Fingal (51)
EI jobs per 10,000 (LF)	336	26/26 (Counties)	721	Monaghan (1,662)	Laois (336)

Extract from IBEC 2017

Rural economic sectors remain very important in Laois. According to Census 2011 data, 8% of Laois' workforce is engaged in farming and forestry; this is higher than the State average (5%). Less than 1% are engaged in quarrying and peat extraction. The growth in employment in these land-based sectors in the Midlands between 2012 and 2015 reinforces the continuing importance of this sector to the local economy.

Table 14: % of the Labour Force engaged in the Rural Economy

Broad Industrial Group	% of Laois workforce 2006	% of Laois workforce 2011
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	7.59%	8.14%
Mining, quarrying & turf production	0.95%	0.67%

Source – CSO 2011

Table 15: Numbers involved in NACE Sectors

QNHS – Midlands QNQ40	Q1 2012-15 Increase no.s	Q1 2011-15 Increase %
All NACE Sectors	9200	8.8%
A – Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	2800	38.9%

Source – CSO 2011

In the Agricultural Census 2010, 72% of land in Laois was used for farming purposes, while 14.7% is associated with forestry. The future development of agriculture is underpinned by the State agency Teagasc programmes in relation to Foodwise Agri-Food Strategy 2025 and the Forestry Programme 2014–20 in its Advisory and Education Strategic Plan for the Region 2015–2020.

The Council recognises the importance of agriculture for sustaining, enhancing and maintaining a viable rural economy. The Council will support and facilitate agricultural restructuring and diversification within the framework of the 2020 Strategy (Department of Agriculture 2010), in order to

integrate the sector more closely with rural development, in pursuit of environmental and social objectives. This approach accords with national policy as set out in the National Sustainable Development Strategy. The Council supports the emphasis in the National Development Plan on investment, on measures for improving farm structures, including farm waste management, animal welfare, food quality and environmental protection, complementing the substantial investment in REPS. The optimum and environmentally sensitive use of land no longer required for agriculture will be a key issue over the Plan period. Where appropriate Laois County Council will support the production of energy crops on set aside land throughout the County.

1. *Ensure a Strong County Town status which enables the town of Portlaoise to development incrementally in line with the Core Strategy evidence base as included in the Draft County Development Plan 2017-2023*
2. *Ensure that Portlaoises' position at the arrival point into 2 regions and potential as an inter regional economic driver - the Greater Dublin Region and the Southern – South west region is acknowledged and capitalised on*
3. *Promote the revitalisation of town centres in line with Town Centre Management Strategies which encompass a vision, public realm and land use regeneration package*

• **Opportunities for regions**

The importance of local authorities working together to ensure that there is a consistent approach to planning and investment in our communities needs to be addressed in the new NPR - example of the joint spatial plan for the Carlow Graiguecullen urban area. Common issues were identified and a commitment given to prioritise common policies in both local authorities. Similarly a joint local area plan has been done for the Portarlinton town which shares boundaries with Offaly County Council.

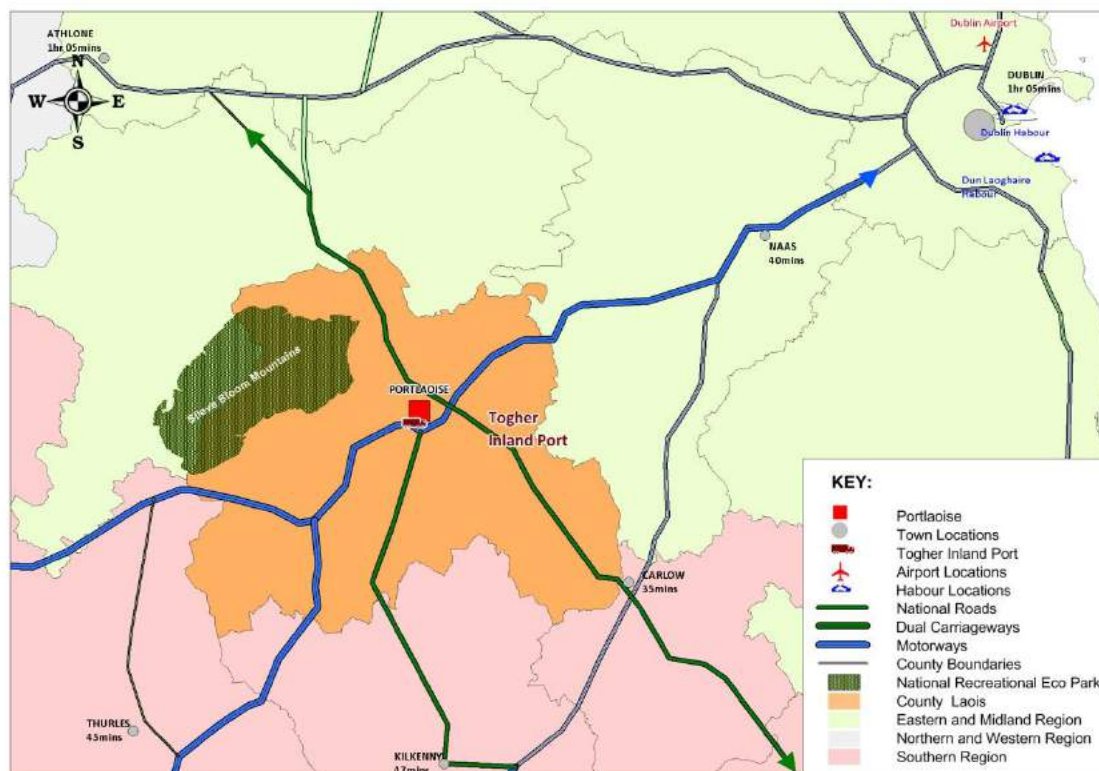
1. *Identify cross border towns within regions and prepare joint land use strategies which have the capacity to capitalise on their position to the betterment of the communities they serve and the regions as a whole*
2. *Identify Carlow – Graiguecullen (Joint Laois / Carlow Local Authority partnership approach) and Portarlinton (Joint Laois / Offaly Local Authority partnership approach) for Joint LAPS*

• **The potential for rural Ireland**

The amenity value our county offers to Ireland inc. also should not go unnoticed. The unspoilt nature and huge potential to develop our natural amenity attractions such as the Slieve Blooms which we have safeguarded successfully from inappropriate development must be considered as an area worthy of mention in the context of a network of spaces through the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) area.

In conjunction with our neighbouring counties of Offaly, Westmeath and Longford to the north of the Midlands, the future coordinated development of the diverse landscape of peatlands, mountains and waterways has been part of ongoing projects within this region for many years particularly since the adoption of the Regional Planning Guidelines in 2010.

The proximity of Dublin City and its associated population of over 1M within a travel time of 1 hour by either road or rail provides an opportunity for the Slieve Bloom Mountains to be developed into a National Recreational Eco-Park – see map below.



The development of this National Recreation Eco Park could be an important asset in terms of supporting the population catchment of the Dublin City region but also in providing a visitor destination to an international audience.

Planning permission has been granted for a Mountain Biking Trail on Coille owned lands through the Slieve Blooms (supported by both Laois/Offaly Local Authorities) which will offer a new experience to the visitor coming from local, national or international destinations and also give a boost to the rural economy within its zone of influence i.e the towns and village that lie within its foothills.

Equally the proposed development of the Barrow Blueway by Waterways Ireland offers a similar asset across three counties (Kildare, Laois and Carlow) and two regions (EMRA and SRA) within the country.

Abbeyleix Bog is another fine example of a community led initiative which has increased the biodiversity of the area and the visitor attractiveness to the area, similar to Lough Boora in Offaly.

The potential from these types of natural amenities to be developed for recreational and amenity purposes with some interventions offers life to rural towns and villages. Sustainable employment opportunities may be realised to enhance the tourism product such as -bike hire, accommodation, cafes, restaurants, etc.

This potential has been actioned in the Laois LECP 2016 as follows:-

High Level Goal G2 - Diversify and Strengthen a Sustainable Laois Economy

With the following actions associated :-

Action 8 - Coordinate with other Local Authorities to discuss the feasibility of joint projects or funding applications such as (i) developing cross-regional walking and cycling trails and (ii) LIFE funding for a Midlands Holistic Peatlands Plan- this too is supported by the following documents at National level -- Goals 4, 10, 11, 13, Policy EDP 15 of MRPGs, Midlands APJ 2015 (Action #55, 62, 63), Bord na Mona (2015) Stability 2030

Action 13 - Continue to examine how proposals to develop an off-road Mountain Bike Trail in the Slieve Bloom Mountains across the Laois-Offaly County Boundary can be advanced- This too is supported by the various following documents at national level - Goals 4, 7, 12, 13 MRPGs, Midlands APJ 2015 (Action #61), Energising Ireland's Rural Economy (CEDRA 2014), National Trails Strategy, Coillte Off-Road Cycling Strategy 2012

Action 14 - Continue to examine how Barrow Blueway Proposals (Works and Re-Branding), to make the Barrow Way a better known & more attractive recreational and tourism amenity, can be advanced – This too is supported at a national level in the various following documents - Goals 4, 7, 12, 13 MRPGs, Midlands APJ 2015 (Action #55, 63), Energising Ireland's Rural Economy (CEDRA 2014), Smarter Travel, National Trails Strategy, Lakelands & Inland Waterways Strategic Plan 2010-2015.

The importance of walking and cycling needs to be emphasised within the national Planning Framework. A walking and Cycling Strategy was undertaken in County Laois during the last County Development Plan period and aimed to achieve objectives that would Designate and work towards the delivery of strategic cycling links in Laois on an on-road or off-road basis, Tie-into major walking and cycling projects being undertaken by key stakeholders in Laois, Make Laois Towns more pedestrian and cycle-friendly, promote Laois as a walking and cycling destination to domestic and overseas visitors ,Support the principle of delivering a cycling link between the towns of

A.1 Tullamore – Mountmellick

A.2 Mountmellick - Portlaoise

A.3 Portlaoise - Stradbally

A.4 Stradbally - Graiguecullen/Carlow

Routing any link away from the N80 and tying into the Barrow Way

B1. Portlaoise, Kildare Town, Newbridge and Naas

B2. Portlaoise and Athy

B3. Portlaoise and Kilkenny via Abbeyleix and Durrow;

C1. Portlaoise – Monasterevin

C2. Borris-in-Ossory – Roscrea

C3. Durrow – Cullahill;

This would increase the accessibility across the regions.

There is a gap in the provision of an Events / conference centre within the Midlands SPA and anecdotal evidence suggests that large scale events have to be held in Dublin, however there is opportunity to stage large scale events within County Laois which is evidenced in the holding of the Electric Picnic for the past 14 years and the National Ploughing Championships for 3 consecutive Years. There is capacity within Portlaoise town and within its zoned area for the housing of such a facility which is accessible by a range of public transport and good motorway facilities and has the water services capacity to cater for same.



1. *Establish the Slieve Bloom Mountains as an National Recreation Eco Park ;*
2. *Harness the potential of the natural assets of the Midland SPA to become an eco destination ;*
3. *Facilitate the provision of an Events Centre within County Laois to cater for the National Audience*

3. IRELAND UNIQUE ENVIRONMENT – CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Climate Change is an international and national issue that must be factored into how we plan for the sustainable growth of the country over the next 20 years.

If the choice is to create large city regions, there is an expectation that the energy necessary to sustain that will put pressure on current infrastructure. The provision of renewable energy is a predominant issue facing rural Ireland in the context of wind and solar energy applications.

This needs to be addressed within an National Planning Framework as to how we are to provide energy for the growing population of our “city regions “ up to 2040 to ensure that rural Ireland is not blighted at the expenses of growing city regions.

Our expectation for our rural landscape has to be stipulated in the National Planning Framework ... what's our priory for it is it to be the foreground for energy infrastructure installations or is it to developed through the tourism initiatives such as Ireland ancient east, Wild Atlantic Way for the betterment of the rural economy.

4. EQUIPPING IRELAND FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT – INFRASTRUCTURE

The infrastructure required to enable development – where is it to be located and how will it guide a national spatial framework?

A fundamental gap does exist though in so far as we have not yet joined the dots with regard to providing vital infrastructure such as water services, energy installations, transport networks (private and public), etc whilst considering the environmental implications in a cumulative way.

Public Transport provision needs a more coordinated approach, particularly if we are to plan seriously for a robust public transport system that will connect places, reduce the impact on the environment in relation to carbon emissions and allow for a more socially inclusive society where low income families have access to health, education and other services only provided within urban conurbations.

The provision of Broadband continues to be an issue for a rural county like County Laois. The merits in rolling out a robust infrastructure in the towns and villages and to the rural areas would certainly provide benefits to those that are commuting from rural destinations to Dublin City on a daily basis for employment in so far as options to work from home become a reality which in turn reduces the need to travel (mostly by private transport) and impact on the environment ultimately.

This planning framework should be a guide to where investment priorities will be over the next 23 years and not left to each regional assembly to compete for.

Locally each Local Authority is faced with making both policy and application decisions on key pieces of necessary infrastructure in the absence of having guidance as to what or where our priority values are.

- 1. An overlay of all national infrastructural projects and plans against environmental criteria and in particular impact on our national landscape needs to be examined in the context of our next National Planning Framework;***
- 2. Ensure rollout of the National Broadband Plan***
- 3. Promote investment in Public Transport – intercity train, park and ride facilities at intercity locations such as Portlaoise whereby there is the potential to connect the motorway with the main trainlines***

4. ENABLING THE VISION – IMPLEMENTING THE NPF

Local Authorities are instrumental in enabling the National Planning Framework to be realised. Planning Authorities await the NPF and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES) to inform and update their core strategies contained within their County Development Plans.

There is a 2 year review built in to the legislative process for reviewing County Development Plans. This needs to be mirrored in the National Planning Framework process in order to allow the opportunity to update and respond to economic, social and environmental changes that may occur and have impact on the spatial direction of Ireland during the time period of this framework.

Lessons learned from the last NSS was that there was not the opportunity in a spatial sense to respond to the economic challenges that we were faced with at national, regional or county level.

From an environmental perspective the monitoring associated with the SEA and AA processes should be used as indicators in relation to how well the National Planning Framework is working, particularly in relation to fulfilling its objectives on the Climate change and sustainability agenda.

A Coordinated Monitoring Team needs to be established in order to review the implementation of the National Planning Framework in the context of

- Delivery of jobs
- Delivery of Infrastructure – Physical and Social
- Delivery of Housing
- Success and performance of Places – indicators such as
 - a. Retail performance indicators
 - b. Vacancy levels
 - c. Environmental indicators – litter/waste/energy efficiency within public spaces
 - d. Use of localised modes of transport – walking/cycling to and from places
 - e. Visitors Opinion
- Climate Change/ Environmental indicators

Fiscal incentives need to be put in place to achieve much of what has been suggested in order to

- Increase the use of public transport in a national context as an alternative to the use of the private car;
- Live in town and city centres in an affordable way;
- Increase energy efficiency in building for the future;
- Work from home and/or e-working initiatives.