

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The County Development Plan has been prepared in accordance with the provisions of Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, and replaces the Laois County Development Plan 2017 - 2023. The Plan is being prepared at a time when the national economy has emerged from a sustained period of contraction and is showing strong signs of continued growth. However the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Irish society and the economy has resulted in a reimagining of how we live, work and socialize. There have been widescale job losses in areas such as accommodation, food, arts and entertainment, however for a county like Laois, remote working opportunities have arisen with people commuting less and working from home or from co working spaces in the county. The national unemployment rate stood at 14.7 per cent in September 2020 which is much higher than the pre-pandemic level. On a social side, local tourist attractions, recreational spaces and walks/ cycling routes have become better utilized during the course of the Pandemic which has informed how we plan for the future in the plan. The outlook for the next plan period is uncertain due to the combined risk of ongoing COVID-19 restrictions and a no-deal Brexit.

The main purpose of the Plan is to set out a framework for the sustainable spatial and physical development of the County Laois while considering the conservation and protection of the built and natural environment, over the period of the Plan and beyond. It also aims to carefully consider all the needs of society, its individuals and groups. Key to this is ensuring that equal opportunities are promoted under all the various themes of the Plan. Following the implementation of the Local Government Reform Act, 3 Municipal Districts have been established in the County:

- Portlaoise MD;
- Graiguecullen/Portarlinton MD; and
- Mountmellick/Borris-In-Ossory

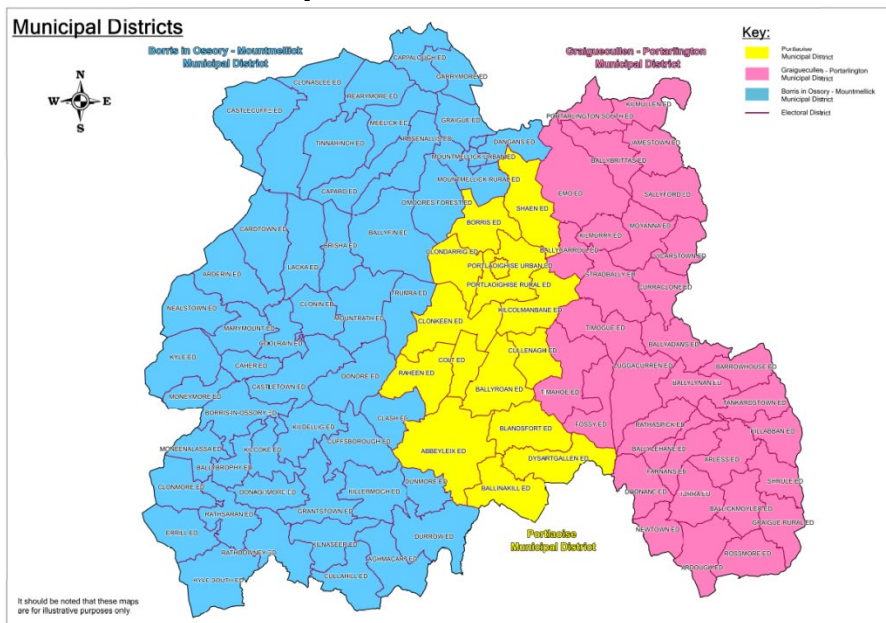


Figure 1.1 Laois Municipal Districts (Source PPN)

1.1 COUNTY LAOIS PROFILE

Laois is an inland county in the south midlands of Ireland covering an area of 171,990 hectares which equates to 2.4% of the national landmass. Occupying a strategic position near the centre of the country, County Laois is land locked and shares borders with five adjoining counties; Carlow, Kildare, Kilkenny, Offaly and Tipperary. Administratively, since January 2015 it is part of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly and in terms of travel patterns is increasingly under the influence of the Greater Dublin Area (GDA). The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA), has twelve constituent local authorities split into three Strategic Planning Areas as follows: Dublin Region, Eastern Region and Midlands Region, of which Laois forms part of (Figure 1.2).



Fig 1.2 Strategic Planning Areas for the Eastern and Midlands Regional Authority (Source RSES)

County Laois is approximately 70kms from the Dublin metropolitan area. This relative proximity to the capital has had a major effect on both the nature and extent of development and the associated traffic movements, particularly in the northern and eastern parts of the county. The travel time between Laois and Dublin continues to decrease as a consequence of improved road and rail infrastructure.

Laois has a population of over 84,697¹ people living and working in a network of attractive towns and villages, ranging from the central key town of Portlaoise to the historic market towns of Abbeyleix and Stradbally. In physical terms, the landmass of County Laois consists of a central plain with productive agricultural land, surrounded by a number of upland areas including the Slieve Bloom Mountains in the northwest, Killeslin Plateau in the south east and Cullahill Mountain in the south. Though not as extensive as in counties such as Offaly and Kildare, there

¹ Census 2016

are significant tracks of cutaway peatlands in the county, mainly situated between Portlaoise, Mountrath and Abbeyleix.

Approximately 0.01% of County Laois is covered by water. The principal rivers are the Barrow, Nore and Erkina which flow in a northwest-southeast trajectory and there are minor man-made lakes at Ballyfin, Grantstown and Heywood. The Grand Canal passes through the north east of the county and links to the wider River Barrow navigation system. All of these watercourses offer much potential by way of natural and cultural heritage, tourism, leisure and recreational pursuits.

1.2 VISION, OBJECTIVES AND OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

This Plan provides a positive vision for Laois which will enable the county to continue to make a significant contribution to national economic recovery by promoting sustainable development. The Strategic Vision of the Development Plan is as follows:

VISION

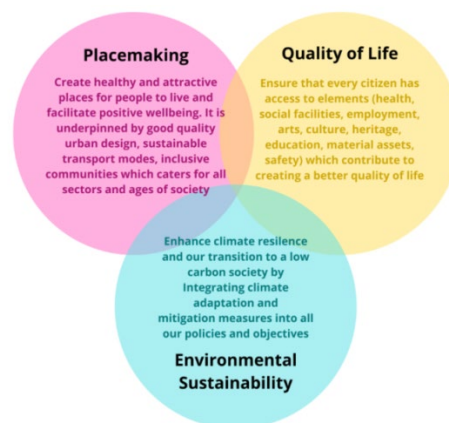
To improve the quality of life for all citizens in County Laois by creating sustainable communities and an environment that supports a vibrant, growing and well connected economy, making it a County where people want to live, work, visit and do business, without compromising the environmental integrity of the county.

In order to achieve this, the County Development Plan has the following objectives:

OBJECTIVES

- To provide a framework for the future sustainable development of the county, defining acceptable forms of development and where they should be directed;
- To support and facilitate and promote a transition to a low carbon society;
- To provide a detailed basis for the promotion and management of development;
- To implement National and Regional development policy provisions at a county level;
- To promote and assist Laois's economic development opportunity and encourage increased resilience in the County's enterprise.

The following guiding and interrelated principles will be considered and integrated into each chapter and the formulation of each policy objective:



1.3 REVIEW PROCESS AND STATUTORY CONTEXT

Under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, each Planning Authority is obliged to prepare a Development Plan for its functional area every six years, the review of which should commence four years after its adoption.

However, due to the recent changes in Government planning policy (namely the introduction of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)), in accordance with Section 11 (1) (b) (iii) of the Act, the Planning Authority is required to either review or vary the current Plan within 26 weeks of the adoption of the RSES.

In this regard, and given the timeframe of the existing Laois County Development Plan 2017 - 2023 which was due to be reviewed in July 2021, Laois County Council commenced a full review of the Plan in January 2020.

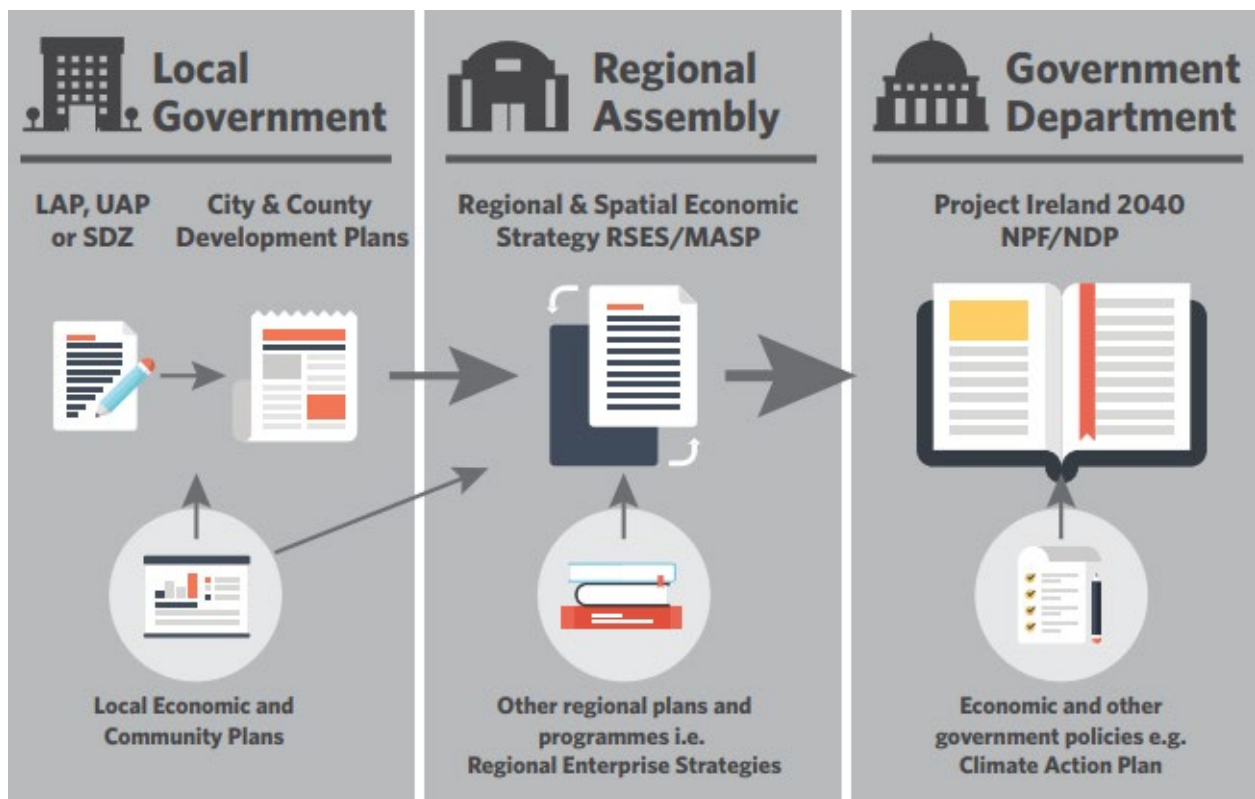


Figure 1.3: Overview of the Planning System in Ireland (source: NPF)

In accordance with Section 11 (1)(a) of the Planning & Development Act 2000 as amended, the review of the existing Development Plan and preparation of a new Development Plan by the Planning Authority is required to be strategic in nature for the purposes of developing-

- the objectives and policies to deliver an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area of the Development Plan;
- the core strategy;
- and shall take account of the statutory obligations of any local authority in the area and any relevant policies or objectives for the time being of the Government or of any Minister of the Government.

The Plan has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) and fully complies with the mandatory requirements for preparation of a Development Plan as indicated in Section 10 (2) of the Act which consist of, inter alia, population and housing projections (core strategy), the zoning of land, the provision of infrastructure, the conservation and protection of the environment, and the integration of the planning and sustainable development with the social, community and cultural requirements (please note this list is not exhaustive).

The Act also requires the Development Plan to be consistent with the policies and objectives of our National and Regional planning guidelines, the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES). An overview of the planning hierarchy is illustrated in Figure 1.2.

1.3.1 PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Prior to the preparation of this Plan, notification of the review of the plan process was issued to all statutory prescribed bodies, local community and voluntary groups through the Public Participation Network (PPN), Planning and Economic Development Strategic Policy Committee (SPC), statutory undertakers and service providers and the general public.

The general public were consulted through a social media campaign, newspaper notices and public information meetings. Five public information meetings were carried out in January and February 2020 across the County.

Submissions were invited on the development of the county from all the interested persons, bodies and organisations. Following this preliminary consultation phase, the Chief Executive's Report on the submissions received was presented to the elected members. This report summarised the issues raised and outlined the Chief Executive's recommendation on changes to policy in the new plan.

1.4 ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENTS

The County Development Plan is also required to be compliant with other legislation and guidance, in particular the requirements for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA).

1.4.1 STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT [SEA]

A Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a formal systematic evaluation of the likely significant effects of a proposed plan or programme on the environment. It is carried out in parallel to the preparation of the County Development Plan in accordance with the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 (SI No. 436 of 2004), as amended. The main environmental issues which are considered during this process are as follows:

- Biodiversity;
- Landscape;
- Soils;
- Population and human health;

- Water;
- Air;
- Material and cultural assets; and
- Climatic Factors.

The evaluation of the likely environmental consequences of alternative strategies for the accommodation of the future development of County Laois is also part of the SEA Process.

1.4.2 APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT (AA)

An Appropriate Assessment is an assessment of the potential effects of a proposed plan on its own or in combination with other plans or projects on one or more European Sites (these are Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for birds, Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for habitats and species). The findings of the assessment must be taken into account by the competent authority namely Laois County Council, in reaching its decision to adopt the County Development Plan 2021 - 2027.

1.4.3 STRATEGIC FLOOD RISK ASSESSMENT (SFRA)

In accordance with the Planning System and Flood Risk Management: Guidelines for Planning Authorities (DEHLG, 2009), the purpose of the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) is *“to provide a broad (area wide) assessment of all types of flood risk to inform strategic land use planning decisions. SFRA’s enable the Local Authority to undertake the sequential approach, including the justification test, allocate appropriate sites for development and identify how flood risk can be reduced as part of the development plan process”*.

The context of flood risk in Laois will be considered with specific reference to people, property, infrastructure and the environment at risk of flooding. This will be examined in the context of a range of sources of flooding including fluvial, pluvial, groundwater, sewer and artificial reservoirs and canals. In accordance with the Planning System and Flood Risk Management: Guidelines for Planning Authorities (DEHLG, 2009), a two stage assessment of flood risk was undertaken for settlements zoned for development within the County Development Plan 2021 - 2027.

1.5 POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) require that a development plan shall, so far as is practicable, be consistent with national plans, policies and strategies, which relate to the proper planning and sustainable development of the area covered by the plan.

1.5.1 PROJECT IRELAND 2040

Project Ireland 2040 is the Government’s overarching policy initiative to make Ireland a better country for all citizens. This policy initiative is set out in two documents as follows:

- The National Planning Framework (NPF): The NPF replaced the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and became effective on 16th February 2018. The purpose of the NPF is to act as a strategic development framework, setting out the long-term context for Ireland’s physical development and associated progress in economic, social and

environmental terms. The Framework consists of 10 National Strategic Outcomes (see Figure 1.2) and 75 National Policy Objectives formulated to ensure where development and investment should be guided to shape the national, regional and local spatial development in economic, environmental and social terms to 2040.

- The National Development Plan (NDP) 2018-27: which sets out details of infrastructure investment until 2027 and is closely aligned to the 10 National Strategic Outcomes detailed in the NPF. This will ensure that investment priorities and capital expenditure will be consistent with the underlying principles of the planning strategy set out in the NPF.



Figure 1.4: National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework

1.5.2 REGIONAL AND SPATIAL ECONOMIC STRATEGY FOR THE EASTERN AND MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

Following the publication of the NPF, each of the 3 regions within Ireland were required to adopt a Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) which replaced each Regional Authority's Regional Planning Guidelines.

County Laois forms part of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) (see Figure 1.5 below), which has 3 sub regions or Strategic Planning Areas (SPAs), namely the Midland,

Eastern and Dublin SPAs. Laois is located in the Midlands SPA along with Offaly, Westmeath and Longford. The EMRA adopted the RSES on May 3rd 2019 which became effective on June 28th 2019.

The EMRA defines the RSES as a ‘strategic plan which identifies regional assets, opportunities and pressures and provides appropriate policy responses in the form of Regional Policy Objectives. At this strategic level it provides a framework for investment to better manage spatial planning and economic development throughout the Region’.

Similar to the NPF, the RSES contains 16 Regional Strategic Outcomes which are underpinned by the principles of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity.

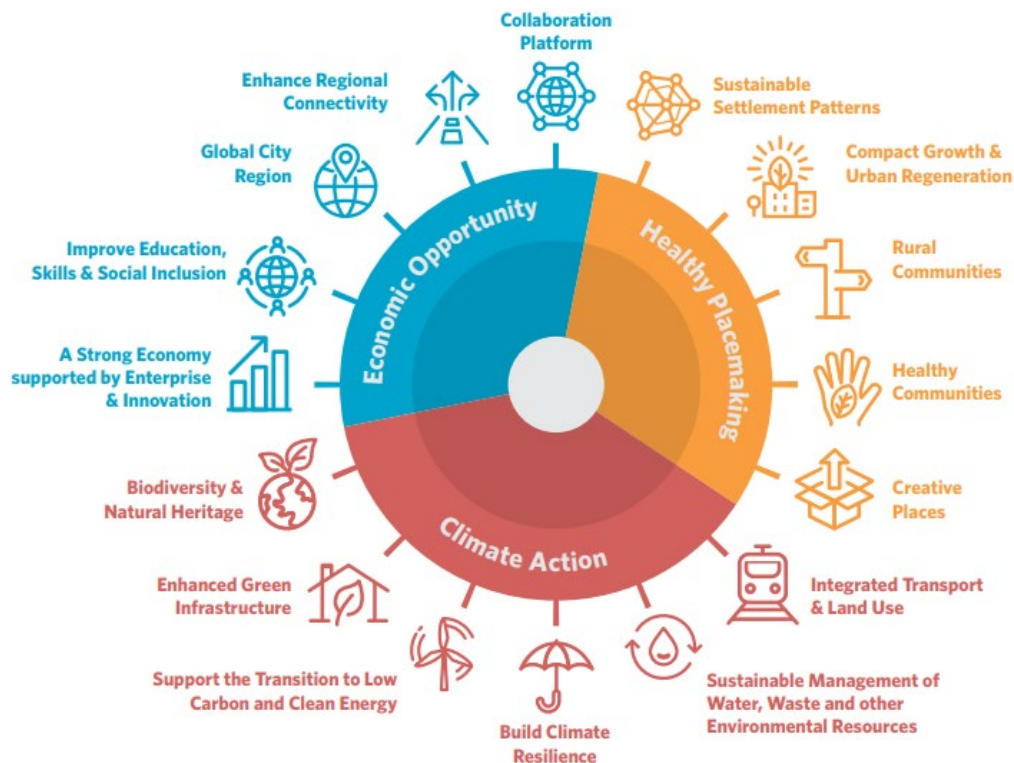


Figure 1.5: Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (Source: RSES)

1.5.3 SECTION 28 PLANNING GUIDELINES

Other relevant documents include various Guidelines for Planning Authorities issued by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government.

1.5.4 LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL CORPORATE PLAN 2019 – 2024

Laois County Council’s Corporate Plan 2019 – 2024 serves as a strategic framework for action during the lifetime of the Council and is one of a number of documents setting out the aims and principles that will inform and guide the activities of the Council over the period 2019 - 2024. Its Mission Statement is as follows- ‘The Council will lead the sustainable economic, Social, cultural

and community development of our County and deliver quality public services to the communities we serve’.

The key strategic objectives to be pursued are as follows:

- Support and enhance local democracy.
- Facilitate and encourage sustainable economic growth and employment.
- Develop and grow Laois’s social and physical infrastructure.
- Improve efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of services.
- Promote and develop Laois as a place to live, learn, work, visit and do business.

1.5.5 LAOIS LOCAL ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY PLAN (LECP) 2016 - 2021

The Local Government Reform Act 2014 sought to create a stronger and clearer role for local government in economic development and community development and introduced Local Economic and Community Plans.

The LECP sets out, for a six-year period, the objectives and actions needed to promote and support the economic development and the local and community development of the county, both by the Council itself directly and in partnership with other economic and community development stakeholders.

The Development Plan and the LECP effectively operate parallel to one another whereby the LECP provides a supporting framework for the economic development and local community development of Laois, the County Development Plan provides an overarching strategy and statutory policy support for the proper planning and sustainable development of the County at a spatial level. Consequently the policies and objectives of the County Development Plan must be complementary to and consistent with the high level goals and objectives of the LECP.

1.6 HOW TO USE PLAN

The format, layout and content of the Plan have been guided by the Development Plans: Guidelines for Planning Authorities (DoEHLG, 2007), National Planning Framework and Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy. Every effort has been made to co-ordinate and cross reference sections in order to provide a comprehensive and easy to read guide for the public, community groups and developers on particular types of development.

1.6.1 CONTENTS OF THE PLAN

The Plan consists of a written document with supporting appendices and maps, as set out in the table of contents. There are 3 volumes contained in the Laois County Development Plan:

Volume 1:	The Written Statement which comprises of 14 Chapters, providing policy objectives for each Chapter.
Volume 2:	Written Statements and maps for the settlements within the County which have been categorized as Self Sustaining Growth towns, Self Sustaining towns, towns and villages and rural areas.
Volume 3:	Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Appropriate Assessment (AA) and

Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA).

Appendices include the following strategies: DRAFT Housing Strategy, DRAFT Retail Strategy, Landscape Character Assessment, DRAFT Wind Energy Strategy, Record of Protected Structures, Architectural Conservation Areas, Rural Housing Design Guidelines.

A Glossary is provided at the end of Volume 1.

In order to provide a holistic consideration of policies and objectives, each chapter provides specific policy objectives, followed by development management standards. Climate adaptation and mitigation policy objectives have also been interwoven into each chapter where appropriate.

1.6.2 INTERPRETATION

In interpreting this document in all cases should any conflict arise between the written word and accompanying maps, the written word shall take precedence. In all cases the following protocols apply:

- The Council refers to Laois County Council.
- The Plan refers to the Laois County Development Plan 2021 - 2027.
- The County refers to County Laois.

1.6.3 POLICES AND OBJECTIVES

The Plan includes specific policy objectives in each chapter. These are specific approaches or actions that the Council will endeavor to realise to ensure that policies are implemented and that all development proposals are consistent with the proper planning and sustainable development of the county. In the interest of clarity, any reference to a policy objective in the text of this Plan shall be construed as an “objective” of this Plan for the purposes of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) and the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended).