



# Laois Climate Action Plan 2024-2029

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## Appendix A

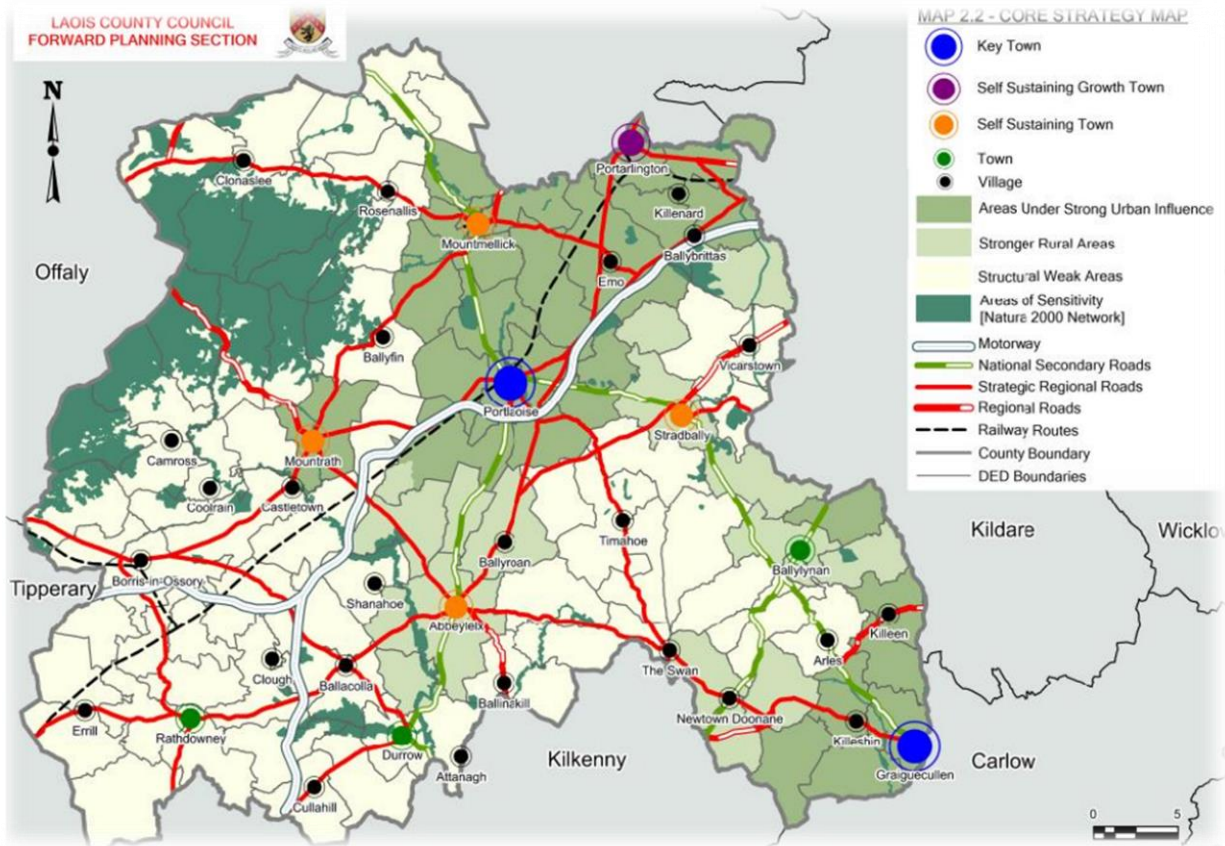
### Policy and Context

# POLICY AND CONTEXT

## 1.1 PROFILE OF COUNTY LAOIS

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).

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.



1.1 Map of County Laois Source: County Development Plan

Laois has a population of over 91,877 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, Killeshin Plateau in the south east and Cullahill Mountain in the south.

Though not as extensive as in counties such as Offaly and Kildare, there 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 REQUIREMENT TO PREPARE A LACAP**

Laois County Council has prepared this Climate Action Plan 2024-2029, to create a low carbon and climate resilient County, by delivering and promoting high quality practice in climate action, at the local level. This Plan is aligned to the Government's overall National Climate Objectives, which seeks to pursue and achieve, by no later than the end of 2050, the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich, environmentally sustainable and climate neutral economy.

These national ambitions are also set out in the [Climate Action and Low Carbon Development \(Amendment\) Act 2021](#), which also frames Ireland's legally binding climate ambition to deliver a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of 51% by 2030. This will place the country on a trajectory to achieving climate neutrality by the end of 2050. In preparing this Plan, the Council has also taken account of other relevant climate legislation and policy, a climate change risk assessment and a climate mitigation baseline assessment at a County scale.

Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 specifically requires all local authorities in Ireland to prepare and make a Climate Action Plan, in consideration of wider national climate and energy targets, addressing both mitigation and adaptation measures:

Climate Change Mitigation relates to changing how we live, move, consume, and manufacture, and use our natural resources to reduce and/or eliminate the production of harmful greenhouse gases; and

Climate Change Adaptation refers to dealing with the impacts of climate change and involves taking practical actions to manage risks, protect communities and strengthen the resilience of the economy (e.g. from flooding, sea level rise etc).

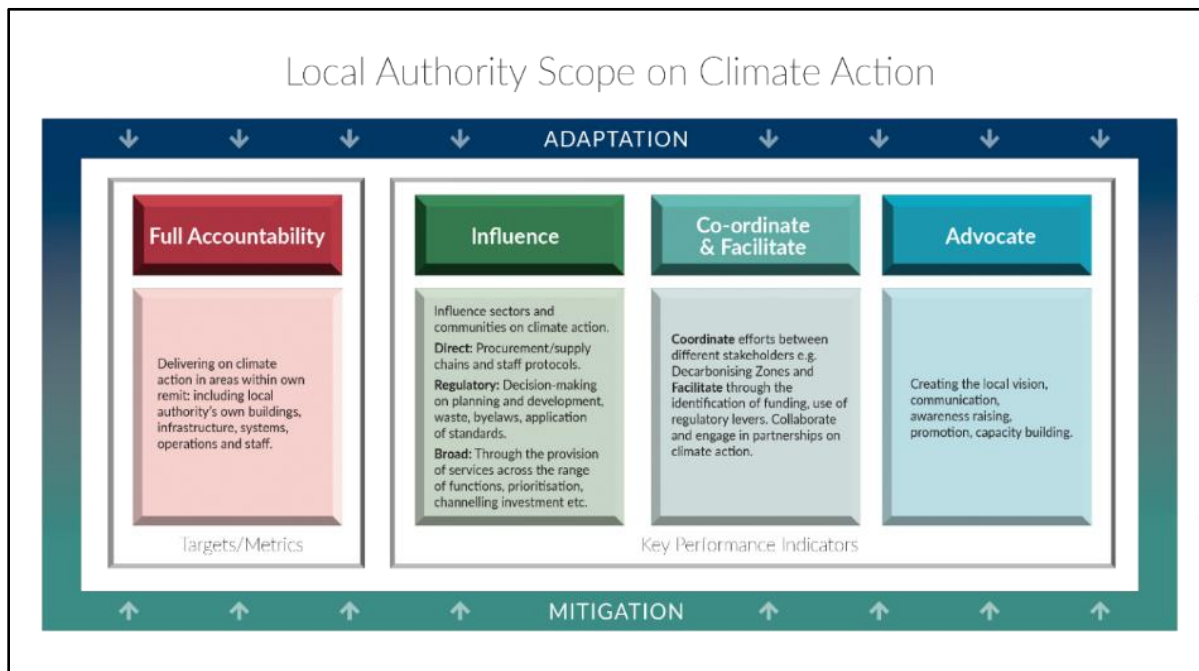
The Climate Action Plan sets a clear pathway for Laois County Council to:

- actively translate national climate policy to local circumstances with the prioritisation and acceleration of evidence-based measures;
- assist in the delivery of the climate neutrality objective at local and community levels; and
- identify and deliver a Decarbonising Zone (DZ) within the local authority area to act as a test bed for a range of climate mitigation, adaptation and biodiversity measures in a specifically defined area, through the identification of projects and outcomes that will assist in the delivery of the National Climate Objective.

Set against the backdrop of an evolving and ambitious framework of national climate policy, Laois County Council maintains a strong commitment to mainstreaming climate action across its own operations and functions, whilst also pursuing a leadership role on climate action, at the local level. This LACAP demonstrates a coherent approach to climate action across the administrative and political structure of the local authority. The Plan is subject to approval by the Elected Members of the local authority, following public consultation and engagement. A range of other plans, including the Council’s Corporate Plan and Laois County Development Plan, also support actions in the Climate Action Plan.

The Climate Action Plan sets out how Laois County Council will be responsible across its own assets, services and infrastructure for enhancing climate resilience, increasing energy efficiency and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, while also demonstrating a broader role of influencing, advocating and facilitating other sectors, to meet their own climate targets and ambitions.

**Figure 1.2 The Responsibilities of Local Authorities on Climate Action**



(Source: Local Authority Climate Action Plan Guidelines, 2023)

The Council will also continue its efforts in rolling out ambitious climate action projects, drawing down available sources of funding, pursuing citizen and stakeholder engagement, all supported by a progressive policy framework. The Council will be participating in the nationally funded Climate Action Fund Strand 1 - Building Low Carbon Communities. This is a fund for local authorities across the country, to support and build low carbon communities.

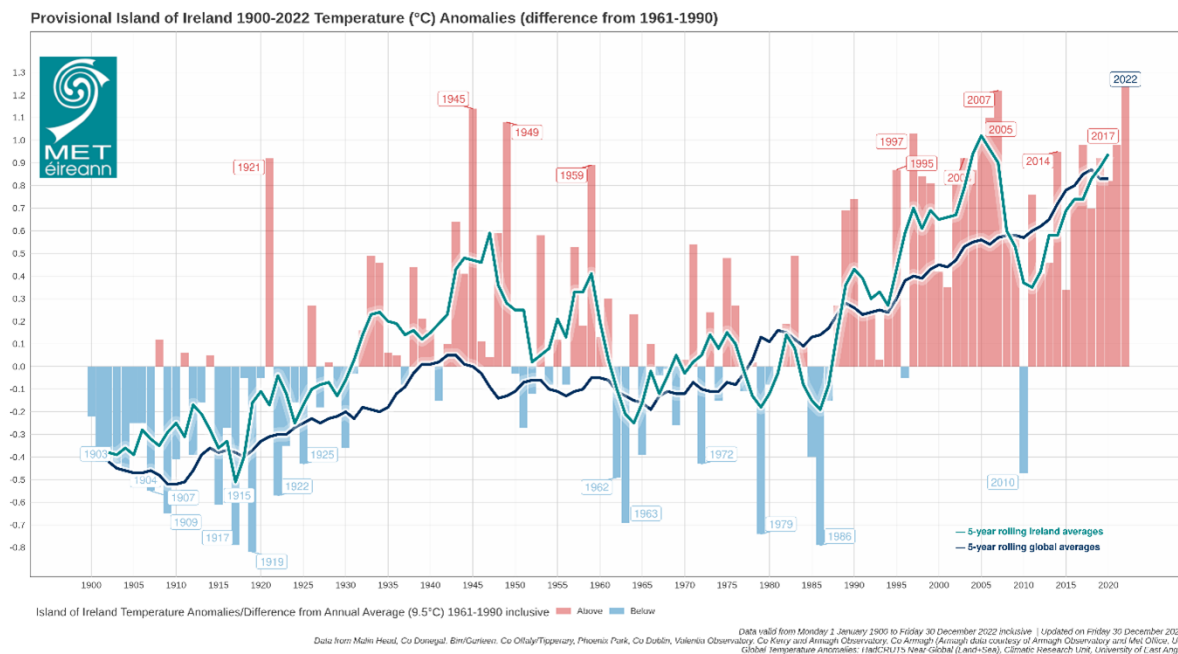
In a changing climate, the aim is to become more resilient to all future possibilities, allowing local communities to thrive and work towards real solutions that are meaningful, inclusive, fair and accessible for all, thereby prioritising a just transition.

### 1.3 OVERVIEW OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is increasingly understood to be the most critical, long-term global challenge of our time, with impacts that continue to be felt both worldwide and at home. The [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC's\) Working Group I Sixth Assessment Report](#), confirms overwhelming evidence that the climate has changed since the pre-industrial era and that human activities, through greenhouse gas emissions, are the principal cause of that change. The IPCC states the unequivocal cause of global warming has been human activities, with global surface temperatures reaching 1.1°C above 1850-1900, in the 2011-2020 period.

Ireland's climate echoes that statement. Figure 3.3 compares the global temperature rise since 1900 to Irish temperatures. Ireland is in line with the global temperature increases, with for example 2022 being a year of record-breaking extremes, in both temperature and precipitation (rainfall). Met Éireann stated that 2022 was "the warmest year on record"; that year also saw Ireland's temperature being above the long-term average for the 12th consecutive year-

**Figure 1.3: Island of Ireland Temperature Anomalies 1900-2022**



(Source: Met Éireann)

Rainfall for 2022, was recorded at below the long-term average at most stations. There was variability in rainfall throughout 2022, with extremes being felt in each of the seasons, resulting in a drier Summer and Spring, and a wetter Autumn and Winter.

Global mean sea level increased by 20 cm between 1901 and 2018. The trend in global mean sea level rise has been consistently rising since 1901. Ireland has so far seen a similar rise in sea level with an average of 2-3 mm per year. A warming climate has caused a rise in sea level, through the loss of sea ice and thermal expansion (the increase in the volume of water due to heating) resulting from the warming ocean.

Ireland has suffered from adverse climate impacts already and recent extreme weather events have highlighted the vulnerability of individuals, businesses, communities, sectors and infrastructure to climate change, emphasising the need for urgency on climate action across all sectors of society.

For example, storms such as Arwen and Barra in 2021 most notably, left 59,000 homes and businesses nationally without power. The adverse impacts of climate change can often compound wider reaching social, environmental and economic challenges. This can increase vulnerability and sensitivity to a changing climate and climate extremes.

Based on observed changes in climate and its impacts, Met Éireann, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other climate scientists, are able to make robust projections on future climate patterns in Ireland and globally. The EPA, Marine Institute and Met Éireann published [The Status of Ireland's Climate Report](#) in July 2021. Future climate projections for Ireland can be summarised as follows:

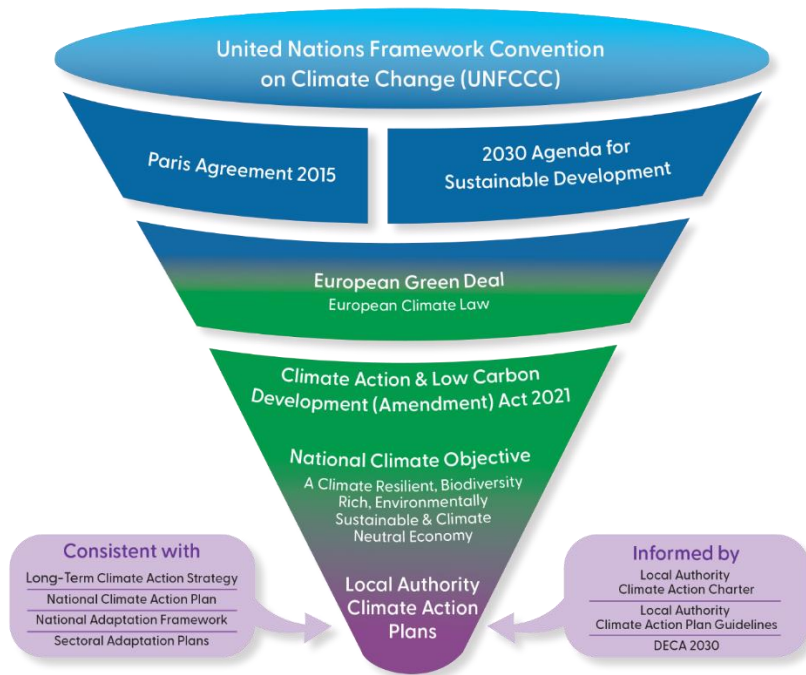
- Climate projections indicate that the climate trends observed over the last century will continue and intensify over the coming decades;
- Temperatures are increasing and are expected to continue to increase and across all seasons;
- Significant reductions in levels of average precipitation (rainfall) are expected in Spring and Summer, whilst projections indicate the increased occurrence of extreme precipitation events, particularly during Winter;
- Projections show little change in average wind speed and direction. The frequency of extreme wind conditions is expected to increase,
- Based on current trends, Ireland will see an increase in sea level rise, similar to what has been experienced to date. Ireland is extremely vulnerable to sea level rise, due to its expansive coastline and the large number of the population that has settled on the coast;
- Increases in the frequency of fluvial (river) and pluvial (surface water) flooding;
- Increases in the frequency and intensity of coastal flooding and erosion;
- Increases in the frequency and intensity of summer heat waves, extreme temperatures and drought;
- Reductions in the frequency of frost and snowfall; and
- An increase in the duration of the growing season (phenological cycle).

The state of Ireland's climate today and how it may look in the future can be brought together in one simple conclusion. Ireland's climate has changed relative to the 1900's, it has undoubtedly warmed along with global temperatures, bringing about an array of impacts that are associated with a warmer climate and more extreme weather events.

#### **1.4 CLIMATE POLICY CONTEXT**

Climate action is given impetus by the scientific evidence that supports the findings of human influence on climate change and the most recent legally binding international treaty on climate change, which sets the framework for ambitious and strengthened policy responses, the Paris Agreement 2015. This Climate Action Plan is set within a broader context of international, EU, national and sectoral climate policy. This is represented in Figure 8.4

**Figure 1.4 Legislation and Policy Context for the Climate Action Plan**



(Source: Climate Action Regional Offices)

## INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY

It has been recognised that successfully tackling climate change requires cooperation and ambition on an international level. Since the establishment of the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change \(UNFCCC\)](#) in 1994, countries have sought to build international cooperation to limit the increase in the average global temperature and deal with the impacts of climate change, that result from these temperature increases.

These efforts led to the signing of the Paris Agreement 2015 at the [Conference of the Parties 21 \(COP21\)](#). The [Paris Agreement 2015](#) is a legally binding international treaty on climate change which was signed by all 196 member countries, including Ireland, and entered into force on 4th November 2016. Through two clearly defined goals the Paris Agreement strives for progressive and ambitious climate action over time to avoid dangerous climate change by:

- Holding global average temperature increases to well below 20C and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.50C above pre-industrial levels; and
- Increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and foster climate resilience.

Another International agreement closely linked with the Paris Agreement is the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) which was adopted by UN Member States in September 2015. At the Agenda's core are 17 [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#). These goals aim to "end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere." The 17 SDGs contain 169 targets to be achieved by 2030. In 2019, World leaders called for a 'decade of action' in order to achieve the Goals within this timeframe.

The European Commission in December 2019, as part of achieving greenhouse gas emission reductions as part of Paris Agreement commitments, announced the [European Green Deal](#) aimed at making Europe the first climate neutral continent. The Deal seeks to achieve no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, to decouple economic growth from resource use, and to leave no one behind. The EU introduced a set of proposals to align the EU's climate, taxation, energy, and transport policies to support achieving this aim. The [European Climate Law](#) made these targets legally binding, which also includes achieving a reduction in net greenhouse gas emissions of at least 55% by 2030.

### **CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY IN IRELAND**

Climate change policy in Ireland now reflects the ambition of the EU and that required to confront the challenges of climate change. The Government through the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act as amended seeks to pursue the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich and climate neutral economy by no later than the end of the year 2050 and to thereby promote climate justice, and just transition. Through progressive economy-wide carbon budgets, sectoral ceilings, a suite of strategies devised to promote a combination of adaptation and mitigation measures, as well as robust oversight and reporting arrangements climate policy is working to scale up efforts across all of society and deliver a step change on ambitious and transformative climate action to 2030 and beyond to 2050.

The [Climate Action Plan 2023](#), launched on 21st December 2022, is the second annual update to the state's Climate Action Plan 2019, and follows the introduction in 2022 of economy-wide carbon budgets and sectoral emission ceilings. The Climate Action Plan 2023 sets out a roadmap to 2025 towards taking decisive action to halve emissions by 2030 and reach net zero, no later than by the end of 2050, as committed to in the Programme for Government.

Ireland published its first [National Adaptation Framework \(NAF\)](#) in 2018, which set out the context to ensure key sectors and local authorities, can assess the key risks and vulnerabilities of climate change, implement climate resilient actions, and ensure climate adaptation considerations are mainstreamed into national, regional and local policy making.

Ireland's current [Long-term Strategy on Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reductions](#) sets out indicative pathways, beyond 2030, towards achieving carbon neutrality for Ireland by 2050. The Strategy builds upon the decarbonisation pathways set by the carbon budgets, sectoral emissions ceilings and the national Climate Action Plan, to ensure coherent and effective climate policy. It is underpinned by analysis of transition options across each key sector of the economy and provides a crucial link between Ireland's 2030 climate targets and the long-term goal set by Ireland's National Climate Objective and the European Climate Law.



[Sectoral Climate Adaptation Plans](#) have been published across Government departments, in response to the National Adaptation Framework. Each Plan identifies the key risks faced across the sector and the approach being taken to address these risks and build climate resilience for the future. They were developed applying a six-step adaptation planning process described in Sectoral Planning Guidelines for Climate Change Adaptation, published by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. The Plans address the following sectors: Agriculture, Forestry and Seafood, Biodiversity, Built and Archaeological Heritage, Transport infrastructure, Electricity and Gas Networks, Communications Networks, Flood Risk Management, Water Quality and Water Services Infrastructure and Health.

The [Local Authority Climate Action Charter](#), signed by Laois County Council in 2019, represents a commitment to scale up efforts and play a key role locally and nationally in delivering effective climate action. It tasks all local authorities with providing robust leadership in advancing climate action at regional and local levels, with adhering to the UN SDGs, in particular Goal 13 Climate Action, as well as reducing emissions from their own operations and to collaborate and partner with local enterprise, community groups, citizens as well as public, private, and educational sectors on climate action initiatives.

[Delivering Effective Climate Action 2030 \(DECA 2030\)](#) is the local government strategy on climate action published in April 2021. The strategy represents an overarching sectoral commitment to ensuring a coherent approach to climate action across the administrative and political structures of all 31 local authorities. At a sectoral level the strategy communicates a general strategic intent through an envisaged leadership position, to engage the local authority network in effective climate action. Within the sector, the overall strategy represents a top-level consensus on the approach to climate action and a strong commitment to the prescribed leadership role. The strategy is a stated roadmap for local authorities in delivering the required decarbonisation and adaptation responses to climate change.

## **1.5 LOCAL AUTHORITY CLIMATE ACTION PLANNING**

The Laois County Council climate action plan strengthens the links between national and international climate policy and the delivery of effective climate action at local and community levels, through place-based climate action. The intrinsic value of the climate action plan is that it plays a significant role in reinforcing the commitment by the local government sector to lead on climate action at local and national levels, as reflected in the local government strategy DECA 2030. Over its preparation and implementation, the Council's climate action plan offers an opportunity to bring together critical stakeholders across communities and businesses to build a vision for a climate neutral future.

Laois County Council and other local authorities across Ireland, are already well positioned at the forefront of climate action in Ireland. Laois County Council plays a significant role in terms of delivering adaptation and mitigation measures at local and community levels. We are entrusted to work through our regulatory and strategic functions to operationalise the ambitious national climate targets and policy at local levels, to assist in the delivery of the National Climate Objective.

The Laois Climate Action Plan is part of longer-term efforts that require a sustained and planned response to support the delivery of the climate neutrality objective at local and community levels. This Climate Action Plan provides a mechanism for bringing together both adaptation and mitigation actions to help drive positive climate action and outcomes across the local authority and its administrative are<sup>1</sup>. The framework of climate actions set within the plan, configures the arrangement of climate actions within a defined structure that ensures alignment between on the ground actions and the high-level vision that the plan aspires to deliver.

This Climate Action Plan has been prepared having had regard to the [Local Authority Climate Action Plan Guidelines](#), published by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications in March 2023.

## **1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE CLIMATE ACTION PLAN**

This Climate Action Plan has taken into consideration international and national climate change policy and legislation as well as knowledge on current levels of climate change as well as its impacts and projections for the future. In showing the outcome of this process, this Climate Action Plan is set out in four parts.

Firstly, the evidence base used to inform on climate action within the jurisdictional area of Laois County Council is presented, including climate change risks and emissions baseline profile.

Secondly, the Plan outlines its framework for climate action including the Plan Vision, Mission, Strategic Goals, Objectives and Actions.

The third part focuses on Laois County Council's Decarbonising Zone, Portlaoise, including the Vision for the DZ, DZ Strategic Priority Areas and DZ Actions.

The final Part of this Plan sets out the Council's approach to implementing actions, measuring progress, the use of metrics as well as how the Council will report on actions over the lifetime of the Plan.

## **1.7 CITIZEN AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

Local authorities have significant experience in engaging citizens and stakeholders, through their existing functions, including land-use planning, housing, enterprise, transport and environmental awareness. Local authorities are also engaged in existing public participation structures and approaches that are bottom-up, local community centred and are outcome focused. These include Public Participation Networks (PPN), Local Community Development Committees (LCDC), Tidy Towns, Age Friendly Ireland, Sports partnerships, Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) and a range of other programmes and initiatives.

The challenges of climate change which are far reaching across society, are not defined by spatial boundaries and therefore require holistic and collective responses. Engagement and participation by citizens and stakeholders in climate decisions and measures that involve them is considered to be very important. This ensures climate actions positively and equitably influence the choices they make.

Delivering on our climate ambition requires the Government and citizens of Ireland to come together in a strengthened 'social contract' for climate action and the co-creation of real solutions to climate change, that are meaningful, inclusive, fair, and accessible for all, thereby prioritising a just transition (Climate Action Plan 2023).

## **1.8 CLIMATE ACTION TRAINING**

In partnership with the CAROs and the Local Authority Services National Training Group (LASTNG), climate action training continues to be rolled out for the entire local authority sector including elected members, to empower and upskill staff to act as leaders on climate action. To date 29 of staff in Laois County Council have been trained in various pillars of climate action training, with future training requirements being assessed on a continuous basis. The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) has also organised training events and an accredited training course for elected members.

At a school level, the Council’s Environmental Awareness officer/Green Schools coordinators work closely with the An Taisce Green Schools programme, to continue awareness activities and Green Flag awards in both primary and post-primary schools. An Taisce has also developed new resources for teachers on climate action, to overlap with teaching curriculums.

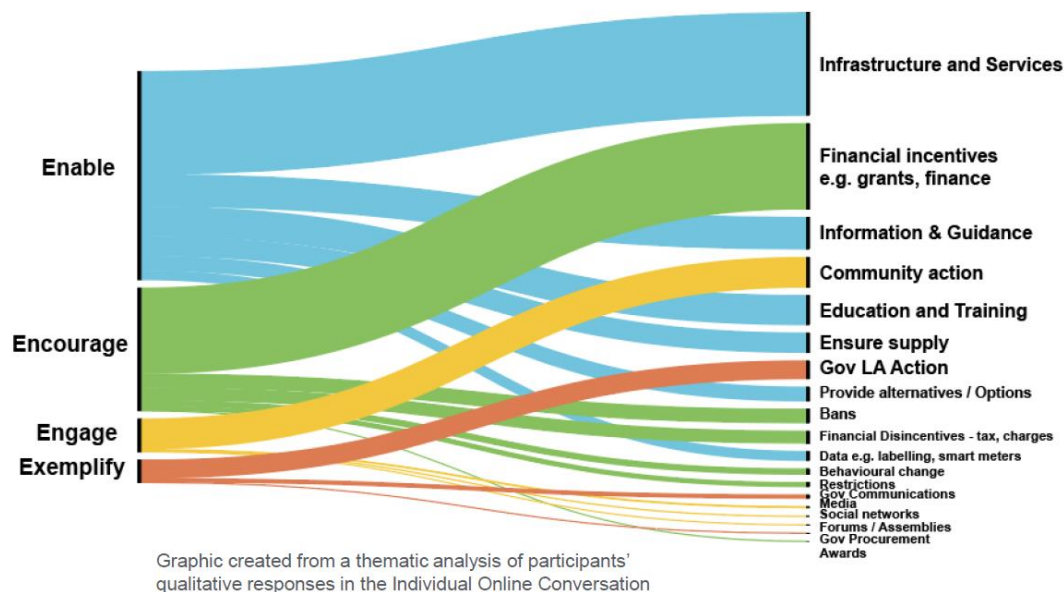
### 1.9 NATIONAL DIALOGUE ON CLIMATE ACTION

In 2022, the Council continued to support citizen and stakeholder engagement initiatives, including the Government’s National Dialogue on Climate Action (NDCA), in particular local ‘Climate Conversations’ led by the Public Participation Network (PPN). The Climate Acts 2015-2021 recognise the Public Participation Networks as a key network to consult regarding climate action and the Council has engaged with the Laois PPN in the public consultation of the Climate Action Plan.

Cumulatively, evidence from the 2022 NDCA programme suggests that there is a high level of awareness of climate change among the Irish people, and they want to get involved in climate action. The findings of the 2022 engagement programme have also shown that there is a willingness to engage in climate action, but people may not know which actions are most effective or where to start acting. Further enabling citizen and stakeholder engagement can make it possible to realise the opportunities that a transition to a carbon-neutral society and economy presents, such as new sustainable careers, warmer more energy-efficient homes, better travel options, more sustainable consumer choice, integrated spatial planning, cleaner air and water and a better environment for future generations.

Figure 3.5 summarises some of the needs of participants in online ‘Climate Conversations’, as part of the National Climate Dialogue. It clearly shows that we as a local authority have an important role in enabling citizens to engage in climate action, through the services we provide.

**Figure 1.5: Summary of findings of the ‘Climate Conversations’ online responses**



(Source: Department of the Environment, Climate & Communications/MCo)

### **1.10 COMMUNITY CLIMATE ACTION FUND**

On February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2023, the Minister of the Environment, Climate and Communications, launched the Climate Action Fund Strand 1 - Building Low Carbon Communities. This is a fund of €24 million for local authorities across the country, to support and build low carbon communities. A further €3 million is being provided to support cross-border and all-island community climate action initiatives. This funding is part of the Community Climate Action Programme, which supports projects and initiatives that facilitate community climate action through education, capacity building and learning by doing.

Community projects eligible for this guidance and potential funding will address the following five themes:

- Home/energy
- Travel
- Food and waste
- Shopping and recycling
- Local climate and environmental action

The actions included in this Climate Action Plan, aim to equip citizens and other stakeholders, with the right information to make informed decisions, thereby assisting and empowering them to play their part in the County's transition to a low carbon and climate resilient region, together with the adjoining local authorities in the Eastern Midlands CARO region. By communicating effectively with citizens, businesses and other sectors about climate action, there is real opportunity to create long-term, positive behavioural change which will have a significant impact on reducing both greenhouse gas emissions and the impacts of climate change to 2030, 2050 and beyond.

### **1.11 CLIMATE ACTION RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**

Laois County Council participates in a range of research projects across different business areas to help inform our response to key work areas such as climate action. Collaborating on research also maintains good working relationships with 3<sup>rd</sup> level universities and technological institutes, as well as other research stakeholders such as representative bodies like the Local Government Management Agency.



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