

CHAPTER 8: TOURISM

Aim: To support the development of the tourism sector as an economic driver for the County, identify and develop key destination towns and visitor attractions and activities for the prioritisation of investment and to encourage the increase of tourism product development.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism plays an important role in the economic development of the Country as it generates significant employment opportunities and business development opportunities in more rural areas. Fáilte Ireland has identified that our landscape and heritage are the key driver for the promotion of Ireland's tourism, followed by its people, its safe environment and its range of attractions. There is an inextricable link between the Region's landscape, agriculture and tourism offer. Central to the development of an integrated ecotourism experience is the provision of quality cycling, walking and hiking routes connecting strategic tourism infrastructure, towns and villages.

Research has identified niche areas such as food, heritage and cycling tourism which can be built into unique tourism product offerings for each of their regional tourism brands. County Laois has much to offer the tourism product and marketing of Ireland as a tourist destination in the overseas market, including; the Rock of Dunamase, the Round Tower Timahoe, Aghaboe Abbey, Donaghmore Workhouse, the Slieve Bloom Mountains, the Rivers Nore and Barrow.

The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and Failte Ireland are responsible for the delivery of policy and investment in tourism in Ireland. Failte Ireland promotes Ireland based on a Regional Experience Brand of which Laois falls within 'Ireland's Ancient East'. The aim of the branding is to inspire visitors to travel to the Ireland's Ancient East by appealing to their interest in local culture and heritage.

8.2 POLICY CONTEXT

This section is prepared in the context of the following documents:

- Project Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework (2018)
- National Development Plan 2018-2027
- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region (2019)
- Food Wise 2025: A 10 Year Vision for the Irish Agri-Food Industry (2015)
- Laois Local Economic and Community Plan 2016-2021
- People, Place and Policy – Growing Tourism to 2025 (DTTS, 2015)
- Tourism Development and Innovation – A Strategy for Investment 2016 – 2022 (Failte Ireland, 2016)

8.2.1 LAOIS TOURISM STRATEGY 2018 - 2023

This collaborative strategy between key tourism stakeholders within County Laois including Laois County Council, Laois Local Community Development Committee, Laois partnership and the Department of Rural and Community Development, aims to grow tourism visitor numbers

and the value of tourism through the enhancement of the Laois tourism product and service base supported by the structures that contribute to the strategic development of the tourism sector across the county.

Map 8.1: Tourist Attractions in County Laois



8.3 TOURISM IN LAOIS

There is significant potential to grow the tourism sector in County Laois. In 2018, Laois welcomed <0.5% of the 9.6 million overseas tourists who came to Ireland, spending <0.5% of the €5.2bn overseas tourism expenditure in Ireland. This figure is down from the 2015 figures, where approximately 57,000 overseas visitors came to Laois. Irish residents took 237,000 trips to Laois and Offaly (2% of the 10.9million domestic trips in 2018) spending €30mn (1% of domestic tourist spend)¹.

Analysis of the overseas visitor data for the East and Midlands Region reveals that a high proportion were Irish-born, repeat visitors or were visiting friends/family. The per capita spend of the overseas tourist who is visiting friends/family is similar or higher than the per capita spend of the traditional holiday-maker. A low percentage of visitors had travelled to the region for the first time. This suggests that while the East and Midlands Region may not be well-known as a

¹ Source: *Faillte Ireland*

tourism destination, once people visit they are inclined to return. It also indicates that many overseas visitors to the area have a strong connection to the region. The high number of solo visitors and visitors to friends/family would suggest that these tourists may spend a lot of time with local people.

Despite the downturn in visitor numbers and revenue in recent years, tourism still makes an important contribution to the economy of Laois and has a strong emphasis in national planning policy. The Strategic Plan for Tourism in Laois 2018 – 2023 focuses on building projects in key destinations and the implementation of a targeted marketing brand in order to develop a high quality visitor destination and experience in Laois. The Strategy also places a strong emphasis on the diversification of the rural economy and the regeneration of towns and villages. Economic sustainability must be considered to ensure that the tourism sector is managed. The Strategy has identified 5 Strategic Ambitions to be achieved by 2023:

Fig 8.1 Strategic Ambitions of Laois Tourism Strategy



The key strengths of the County not only include its central location with robust transport network but also the pristine landscape, unique heritage and lifestyle and amenity pursuits. The growing trend towards activity and adventure based tourism provides a significant opportunity for County Laois. However, it is essential that resources upon which these activities are based are protected from inappropriate development and that Laois County Council works in partnership with a range of organisations to capitalise on and maximise the potential of such opportunities.

The areas of tourism that shall be promoted during the lifetime of the Plan include, however is not limited, to the following indicated in Table 8.1:

Table 8.1: Key Tourism Initiatives

1	The Slieve Bloom Mountains for walking, cycling and mountain biking
2	Events and Festivals has proven to be a successful and a key driver of the Laois local economy and a means of revitalising and maintaining local culture as well as showcasing the people and places of Laois
3	Local arts, crafts and food which provide a local connection and help to celebrate the diversity of the county as a destination
4	Rural tourism and the development of walking and cycling trails and a possible Greenway for the County
5	Towns and villages in the county provide a range of visitor attractions, facilities and services and rely on revenue from tourism
6	Forest tourism for recreation such as walking, running, bird-watching and mountain-biking
7	Development of the Barrow Blueway and Erkina Blueway
8	Heritage attractions such as the Rock of Dunamaise, Aghaboe Abbey, Stradbally Hall, Timahoe Round Tower, Abbeyleix Heritage House and others such as Emo Court and Donaghmore Famine Workhouse Museum, which have the potential for attracting a greater numbers of visitors
9	Development of peatlands for eco-tourism potential such as Abbeyleix Bog and Derrycastle Lakes and Trails (see Chapter 9 Rural Laois and Chapter 11 Biodiversity and Natural Heritage

Policy Objectives for Tourism in Laois

TM 1	Identify all opportunities for funding, including LEADER, Urban and Rural Regeneration Development Fund, national and European funding schemes and seek to maximise the benefit of such funding opportunities to the county
TM 2	Continue to support the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Tourism in Laois 2018 – 2023, in line with national and regional policy, tourism trends and identified challenges, in collaboration with Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland, Coillte, Bord na Mona, tourism businesses and communities and other supporting agencies
TM 3	Continue to support the development and expansion of tourism-related enterprise including visitor attractions, services and accommodation and food and craft businesses, particularly those offering a visitor experience, such as tastings, tours and demonstrations
TM 4	Facilitate the implementation of the Laois Local Economic Community Plan Economic and Community Actions related to tourism development such as the development of a Laois Walking and Cycling App with navigation functions, the translation of existing heritage audio guides and the development of an artisan food proposition associated with Ireland’s Ancient East Programme

TM 5	Direct the provision of tourist related facilities, such as information offices and cultural centres, into town and village locations to support and strengthen the existing economic infrastructure of such centres
TM 6	Support in principle the development or expansion of a tourism around the Slieve Bloom Mountains, Laois' Inland Waterways, Laois' historic towns and villages, heritage-based tourism, activity-based tourism, geo tourism, eco-tourism, food-based tourism, diaspora-based tourism and spiritual tourism. Proposals for sustainable tourism development will be required to demonstrate a need to locate in a particular area and demonstrate compliance with the Development Management Standards.
TM 7	Promote and facilitate the development of rural tourism such as including but not limited to open farms, on-farm craft villages and visitor centres and the reuse and refurbishment of vernacular buildings (houses or farm/industrial buildings) for tourist related facilities, including holiday home accommodation; subject to compliance with Development Management Standards of this Plan.
TM 8	Work in collaboration with Coillte, neighbouring local authorities, Fáilte Ireland, community organisations and other interested parties to develop new forest accommodation, with required ancillary facilities, access, signage and trails for walking, cycling, mountain-biking and horse-riding;
TM 9	Encourage the clustering of tourism enterprise in town and village centres in the interest of sustainable tourism development and the enhancement of the public realms of town and village centres to maximise their tourism potential; in all cases, the applicant must submit a robust assessment setting out the sustainability of any proposal with respect to economic, environmental and social sustainability, as defined herein

8.4 CLIMATE CHANGE AND TOURISM

Environmental sustainability will be central to the development and protection of a viable tourism sector and this is a key consideration in a County where tourism attractions are located in environmentally sensitive areas and close to historic areas where the quality of the built heritage and environment must be protected from inappropriate development – whether tourism related or not. The ‘mainstreaming’ of policy guidance tools such as the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) will undoubtedly address any deficits in relation to many of these key policy areas.

As temperatures continue to rise, heat waves will worsen, extreme precipitation events will become more intense and frequent and the rate of sea-level rise will increase. The direct and indirect impacts of climate change on our cultural, heritage and natural assets may present a threat to their value and integrity. The tourism sector itself is vulnerable to climate change. Threats include more extreme weather events, increasing insurance costs and safety concerns, water shortages and loss and damage to natural assets and attractions at destinations. Continued climate-driven degradation and disruption to cultural and natural heritage will negatively affect the tourism sector, reduce the attractiveness of destinations and lessen economic opportunities for local communities. In proposing measures to deal with the effects of

climate change, it is important to consider any unintended consequences for heritage and tourism that might arise. Truly sustainable tourism development must manage issues of physical and cultural impacts, as well as addressing the urgent necessity to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in this growing sector, especially from transport. At the same time, tourism should pay much greater attention to understanding and addressing the many and varied impacts of rapid climate change that will increasingly affect its operations and destinations.

Climate Change and Tourism Policy Objectives	
TM 10	Promote Laois as a hub for ecotourism and the sustainable development of low impact activities including orienteering, angling, equestrian activities, bird watching, canoeing and kayaking, caving, paragliding, botany, photography, painting and yoga and meditation, in appropriate locations in order to diversify the range of tourist experiences available in the county and extend the tourism season.
Tm 11	Develop the tourism potential of peatlands and in particular facilitate the further development of Abbeyleix Bog and Derryounce Bog
TM 12	Increase connectivity and accessibility to public transport and walking and cycling infrastructure from key tourist destination hubs to encourage more sustainable modes of transport.
TM 13	Encourage that all new tourism related development proposals maximise energy efficiency through siting, layout, design and incorporate best practice in energy technologies, conservation and smart technology.
TM 14	Strengthen resilience to climate change by ensuring all new major tourist developments provide a climate vulnerability assessment within sensitive and vulnerable sites
TM 15	Where relevant, the Council and those receiving permission for development under the Plan shall seek to manage any increase in visitor numbers and/or any change in visitor behaviour in order to avoid significant effects, including loss of habitat and disturbance. Management measures may include ensuring that new projects and activities are a suitable distance from ecological sensitivities. Visitor/Habitat Management Plans will be required for proposed projects as relevant and appropriate
TM 16	Ensure the potential environmental effects of a likely increase in tourists/tourism-related traffic volumes in particular locations/along particular routes shall be considered and mitigated as appropriate. Such a consideration should include potential impacts on existing infrastructure (including drinking water, wastewater, waste and transport) resulting from tourism proposals

8.4 TOURIST INFRASTRUCTURE

Research has shown that overseas tourists want to visit a destination with a variety of experiences to offer and ensuring that support services and high-quality infrastructure to meet the needs of visitors is fundamental to Laois. The Plan will focus on identifying key strategic

projects and areas for investment to deliver tourism products of scale with the capacity to be transformational and a catalyst for tourism development in Laois.

8.4.1 VISITOR SERVICES

Laois County Council will ensure that visitor attractions will be supported for expansion projects such as car parking areas, interpretative centres/signage, visitor kiosks etc. The Council recognises the potential for pressure being placed on the County's natural and heritage amenities through increased tourism. In this regard it is important that the provision for increased tourism activity is in line with the provision of the required infrastructure to support such development. Tourism-related development proposals will be required to demonstrate a high standard of design, with strong consideration given to a proposal's potential impact on its surroundings in terms of scale and intensity and the potential for the proposal to add significantly to the quality of the visitor experience.

8.4.2 ACCOMMODATION

The Council recognises that the provision of accommodation such as hotels, guesthouses, hostels, caravan and camping sites are essential to enable growth in the tourism sector. The Council shall support the development of tourism in the county by encouraging the provision of a wide range of tourist accommodation types and restricting development that would be likely to reduce the capacity of the resource, or have a detrimental impact on the local environment.

In general such developments shall be encouraged to locate within or in close proximity to existing towns and villages where they can avail of existing public services, commercial and community facilities. The Council will support the development and upgrade of accommodation to meet Fáilte Ireland Quality Standards, subject to development management criteria and will require that such relevant standards are met in development proposals where appropriate.

There is also potential within the County to create niche destination tourist accommodation, drawing on the policy objective to develop County Laois as a National Event Centre. Such niche accommodation will be supported in unique settings e.g. Emo House, Stradbally Hall, Roundwood House.

8.4.3 BRANDING

During the life-time of this Plan there will be a phased roll-out of the branding strategy, with investment in tourism signage and the enhancement of the visitor experience across the programme area. The strategy will develop Ireland's Ancient East as a destination that is easy for the independent visitor to explore, interpret, understand and appreciate. The implementation strategy will deal with on the ground information as well as promotional aspects of the brand and the accessibility of sites, possibly including mechanisms for pre-booking, ticketing and improved management.

Policy Objectives for Tourism Infrastructure	
TI 1	Encourage and promote tourism related facilities and accommodation within existing settlements and in rural areas where there is a clear and demonstrated need and benefits to the local community and where the development is

	compatible with the policies set out for the protection of the environment;
TI 2	Encourage and facilitate the provision of access to visitor accommodation, venues and activities and the availability of information on accessibility to those with varying levels of mobility and access issues
TI 3	Support best-practice environmental management including energy efficiency, waste management, procurement and recycling in accommodation providers and tourism enterprises in the County.
TI 4	Support tourism branding in Laois and in particular support the development of Ireland's Ancient East to promote accessibility to local sites.
TI 5	Encourage and support the provision of a wider range of accommodation types throughout the county in order to ensure that the county is an attractive location to spend increased amounts of time for a wide range of visitors

Tourist Infrastructure Development Management Standard

DM TM 1	<p>TOURIST FACILITIES</p> <p>Tourist and recreation facilities, in particular accommodation, shall be generally located within towns and villages unless;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A comprehensive justification of the need for the development by its nature and space requirements to be located outside towns and villages, for example, golf courses, swimming, angling, sailing/boating, pier/marina development, water sports, equestrian and pony trekking routes, adventure/interpretative centres and associated ancillary uses, tourist related leisure facilities including walking and cycling; • Evidence that the proposed development will not have an adverse impact upon the scenic value, heritage value and the environmental, ecological or conservation quality of primary tourism asset(s) and its their general environment • Evidence that potential environmental effects of a likely increase in tourists/tourism-related traffic volumes in particular locations/along particular routes have been considered and mitigation measures proposed. Such a consideration should include potential impacts on existing infrastructure (including drinking water, wastewater, waste and transport) resulting from tourism proposals; • Evidence that, where feasible, existing ruinous or disused buildings or existing heritage buildings have been re-used to maximum potential. This list is not exhaustive and the Council may consider other requirements contained in the chapter on a case by case basis with planning applications should the need arise.
DM TM 2	<p>CARAVAN, GLAMPING AND CAMPING DEVELOPMENTS</p> <p>Caravan, glamping and camping developments shall address the following;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A high standard integrated design and layout linking pitches to well located communal areas and on site facilities and amenities;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compliance with the Regulations for Caravan and Camping Parks (Bord Fáilte 2009); • A detailed hard and soft landscaping plan for the overall site; • Mitigation plans for noise and litter; and • Details of wastewater disposal for the site
DM TM 3	<p>SELF CATERING DEVELOPMENTS</p> <p>Self-Catering developments shall address the following;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The layout of the development shall be of a high standard, incorporating well laid out communal open spaces, significant and appropriate landscaping maintaining existing site features such as hedgerow and trees, car parking provision, segregated waste storage and public lighting. • The design of units should be high quality and respect the character of the area in which they are located. Suburban type developments will not be favoured. Courtyard type developments will be particularly encouraged.

8.5 TOURISM SECTORS

8.5.1 ACTIVITY BASED TOURISM (INCLUDING GREENWAYS, BLUEWAYS AND CYCLEWAYS)

Laois County Council is well placed to capitalise on the growing demand for experiential holidays in a perceived ‘wild’ setting with outdoor activity opportunities on offer throughout the county with an emphasis on walking, cycling and angling. Participation in adventure activities is also becoming increasingly popular amongst visitors from overseas and from within the island of Ireland which includes mountain biking, kayaking and canoeing. The development of greenways and blueways is also an important sector or tourism product to the County and is an important element of creating a sustainable tourism package.

This focus, in partnership with stakeholders such as Coillte, Bord Na Mona and Waterways Ireland, and local community groups, has led to the development of projects such the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail, Abbeyleix Bog Project, Barrow and Erkina Blueways. Off-road looped walking trails are located at various locations in the county, including Durrow Leafy Loop, Cullahill Loop, Dunmore Wood Loop, Ballagh Loop and Bishop’s Wood, Emo Park and Gardens. These projects can be developed in a sustainable way, in harmony with a high quality environment. The Council recognises that these routes cannot come into existence or remain in existence without the full co-operation of the owners of private property on the routes.

Combined off-road cycle and walking routes and recreational trails developed along abandoned rail lines, utility corridors or other natural linear open spaces, such as river banks and canals, are often referred to as Greenways. Although Laois does not have a designated Greenway, the feasibility of a 24km route from Mountmellick – Portlaoise – Abbeyleix has been undertaken. The Council will continue to identify, support and facilitate opportunities for harnessing the potential of the scenic areas, lakes and waterways in a manner that is compatible with the

natural heritage and environment of the area. (Refer to Map 8.1 for Laois’ activity based tourist attractions).

Policy Objectives for Activity Based Tourism	
ABT 1	Support the development of the amenities and recreational potential of the River Barrow, in co-operation with the National Parks and Wildlife Services, Irish Water, adjoining Councils and other relevant authorities
ABT 2	Support in principle and investigate the feasibility of, subject to compliance with the Habitats and Birds Directive, developing and marketing off-road Slieve Bloom Mountain Biking Trail by Coillte, Mountmellick –Portlaoise – Abbeyleix Greenway and Durrow Green Network Cycle Trail in co-operation with relevant stakeholders including Durrow Development Forum.
ABT 3	Develop on-road cycle trails in the Slieve Blooms along existing lightly-trafficked roads in partnership with cycling clubs, Offaly County Council, Laois Sports Partnership, Laois Partnership Company and the National Trails Office, subject to compliance with the Habitats and Birds Directive
ABT 4	Facilitate the sustainable provision at appropriate locations of a network of quality pathways and associated car parks for walkers and cyclists and horse-riders that are attractive and free of vehicular traffic
ABT 5	Co-operate with National Trails Office (management standards), Fáilte Ireland, National Way Marked Way Advisory Committee, Coillte, the Heritage Council and other relevant bodies, in order to support the sustainable development, maintenance and enhancement of walking routes at appropriate locations throughout the county.
ABT 6	Promote and investigate the feasibility of, subject to compliance with the habitats and Birds Directives, sustainable developing and improving of facilities and infrastructure supporting water based tourism activities, (including shore side interpretive centres and jetties). Development proposals outside settlement centres will be required to demonstrate a need to locate in the area and will be required to ensure that the ecological integrity and water quality of the river or lake, including lakeshore and riparian habitats, is not adversely affected by the development

8.5.2 FESTIVALS AND ARTS

Laois is increasingly being marketed as an events and conferencing destination by reason of its accessibility and centrality. High-profile events include Electric Picnic - Music and Arts Festival with a capacity for 70,000 festival goers and the National Ploughing Championships which was most recently held in Ratheniska with a total of 281,000 attendees in 2015.

Events and Festivals have proven to be a successful and key driver of the Laois local economy and a means of revitalising and maintaining local culture as well as showcasing local arts, crafts and food. In particular, the growing importance of food tourism is also an expanding sector and Laois is well positioned to capture some of this market.

The agri-food sector has been credited with playing an integral role in the national economic recovery in recent years. Laois Taste was started in 2019 as a collaborative effort between 21 Laois food and drinks producers, Laois County Council, Local Enterprise Office and Laois Partnership to support and promote local provenance, strengthen the Laois food industry and transform Laois into one of Ireland's top food destinations. Through this medium food producers organise many free events throughout the County and has the potential to offer an alternative experience for visitors.

Fig 8.2 Laois Taste



Policy Objectives for Festivals and Arts

<p>FA 1</p>	<p>Support the development of the arts, crafts and food sectors and liaise with the Crafts Council of Ireland, Laois Partnership, Laois LEO, Fáilte Ireland, and other interested bodies to facilitate growth within this sector.</p>
<p>FA 2</p>	<p>Support and facilitate Laois as a destination for business tourism by maximising the county's strong and competitive brand value and working with key stakeholders.</p>
<p>FA 3</p>	<p>Support and promote the existing festivals and cultural events which take place in</p>

	the county and facilitate the establishment of new events where viable to increase the profile of the county as a key tourism destination.
FA 4	Support the expansion and growth of food enterprises and associated tourist development and in particular Laois Tastes.

8.5.3 IRELAND'S ANCIENT EAST

Ireland's Ancient East, established in 2016, is a brand concept that seeks to attract visitors to the east, midlands and south of the country and build on the wealth of historical and cultural assets in this strategic location. This brand provides Laois with an international platform to market the uniqueness of Laois and county's heritage under the themes of Tales of Two Worlds and Castles and Conquests. A number of key sites have been identified in Laois such as the Rock of Dunamaise, Timahoe Round Tower, Emo Court and Heywood Gardens. Fáilte Ireland has a target growth in visitor numbers of 600,000 (21%) to the region and an additional visitor revenue of €204 million (28%) of which Laois can capitalize on.

This destination brand has been designed to appeal to the key customer segments identified by Fáilte Ireland, namely the Culturally Curious and the Great Escapers, and to present this large geographic area in a cohesive and unified manner. Ireland's Ancient East offers a personal experience of 5,000 years of Europe's history. The Plan will support and facilitate the development of this key tourism stimulus project in the County and support the objectives of the Laois Tourism Strategic Plan 2018.

Policy Objectives for Ireland's Ancient East	
IAE 1	Continue to work in collaboration with other key stakeholders to implement the programmes and plans of the Ireland's Ancient East initiative over the lifetime of the plan to maximise the tourism potential of the county.
IAE 2	Collaborate with Fáilte Ireland, the Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) and other key stakeholders in the development and implementation of a signage programme associated with Ireland's Ancient East to include branded orientation signage and roadside signage
IAE 3	Facilitate the enhancement of appropriate visitor infrastructure and facilities in Laois associated with Laois Ireland Ancient East sites and other places with tourism potential such as Maryborough Fort, Donaghmore Workhouse, Ballinakill village and Durrow Town
IAE 4	Continue to work in collaboration with Fáilte Ireland and other key stakeholders on the development of the Ireland's Ancient East branding strategy, to implement the programmes and plans of the Ireland's Ancient East initiative over the lifetime of the plan to maximise the tourism potential of the county
IAE 5	Facilitate Fáilte Ireland initiatives for the development of tourism experiences in the County that are fit for purpose and deliver on the Ireland's Ancient East brand

	promise, within the context of the land use management and infrastructural provision in the County
IAE 6	Support the implementation of Ireland's Ancient East by facilitating the provision of visitor information– in line with the policies and objectives with respect to heritage sites; and integrating the objectives of Ireland's Ancient East with transport programmes in the County

8.5.4 CULTURAL HERITAGE

Cultural heritage is recognised as one of the most important and fastest growing aspects of the tourist industry which is demonstrated in the success of Ireland's Ancient East. County Laois with its array of heritage sites including historical garden demesnes, architectural heritage, interpretive centres, archaeology and historic town centres is well positioned to benefit from this form of tourism. The development of tourist facilities at these locations and within the wider county should respect the outstanding quality and variety of the natural and built environment in the County and should not damage the resource attractions such as the Rock of Dunamaise, Aghaboe Abbey, Stradbally Hall, Timahoe Round Tower, Abbeyleix Heritage House and others such as Emo Court and Donaghmore Famine Workhouse Museum have the potential for attracting a greater numbers of visitors.

Policy Objective for Cultural Heritage	
CH 1	Ensure heritage assets (built and natural) that are the focus for tourism development are appropriately managed and their special interest conserved from potential adverse effects from visitors or development in general and that best practice standards in relation for the environmental management of tourism enterprises are adhered to
CH 2	Take responsibility for the development of a more sustainable tourism industry which minimises adverse impacts on local communities, the built heritage, landscapes, habitats and species; leaving them undiminished as a resource for future generations, while supporting social and economic prosperity
CH 3	Support and promote, with the co-operation of landowners, public access to heritage sites and features at appropriate locations whilst ensuring heritage related development does not result in negative impacts on the fabric or setting of Laois's heritage assets
CH 4	Support and promote, with the co-operation of key stakeholders, the development of the Fort of Maryborough in Portlaoise and ensure that any development will not result in negative impacts on the fabric or setting of the site
CH 5	Support the objectives of Failte Ireland's Visitor Experience Development Plans, Tales of Two Worlds and Castle and Conquests

8.5.5 NATURAL ASSETS

The Slieve Blooms is perhaps the County's greatest tourism natural asset, particularly for walking and cycling and offers a mix of wide forest paths, rolling hills, single tracks, quiet twisty country roads. The Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail which is a project in collaboration with Coillte, Laois County Council and Offaly County Council offers 35km of trail with trailheads in Baunreagh in Laois and Kinnity in Offaly. The Slieve Blooms also offers 17 different looped walking and hiking trails and eco walks ranging from 4km to 75km with trailheads located in Clonaslee, Glenbarrow and Monicknew.

The waterways of County Laois include 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 also passes through the north east of the county where it 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. In addition to their scenic beauty they offer opportunities for a wide range of activities such as angling, boating, bird-watching, canoeing, and other water based interests.

Increasing areas of Bord na Móna peatlands such as Abbeyleix Bog are becoming cutaway and have significant potential for development and beneficial uses including renewable energy, biodiversity, amenity uses, water storage and Green infrastructure

The County's Natural Heritage assets are also discussed in Chapter 11 of the Plan, where specific policy objectives have been included.

Table 8. 2: Key Heritage Assets

Archaeological Assets	Architectural Assets	Natural Assets
Monastic heritage including Abbey at Aghaboe, intact Round Tower at Timahoe and fine Romanesque doorway at Killeshin	Emo Court and Gardens	Slieve Blooms Nature Reserve with walks at: Monicknew Glenbarrow The Cut
Viking Longphort known as Dunrally Fort close to Vicarstown	Heywood Gardens	Timahoe Esker Nature Reserve with walk
Rock of Dunamaise with Norman Influences	Castledurrow, Ballyfin, Abbeyleix, Stradbally Hall, Roundwood House demesnes	Grantstown Nature Reserve with walk

<p>Maryborough Fort and St Peter's Church and graveyard associated with Plantation of Laois-Offaly</p>	<p>Fine Georgian Square: O'Connor Square Mountmellick</p>	<p>Waterways: Nore, Erkina and Barrow including its source and smaller streams.</p> <p>Grand Canal</p> <p>Small lakes at Ballinakill, Brittas House, Ballyfin</p>
<p>Tower houses at Lea, Cullahill and Ballaghmore</p>	<p>Proposed Architectural Conservation Areas at Portlaoise, Abbeyleix and Durrow</p>	<p>Wetlands walks at Slieve Blooms, Killamuck, Portarlinton and the Derries</p>
<p>Fortified houses at Brittas House,</p>		
<p>Industrial Archaeology Donaghmore Workhouse and Agricultural Museum</p>	<p>Historic town and villages such as Portarlinton, Mountrath Market Square, Clonaslee, Ballinakill, Emo, Timahoe and Stradbally</p>	<p>Woodlands open to the public:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oughaval Wood, • Carrick Wood • Dunmore Wood • Garryhinch Wood • Brittas Wood • Togher Wood • Capponellan Forest and Lake Walk
<p>Mill Buildings at Mountmellick, Castletown, Donaghmore</p>		
<p>Exhibits at Stradbally Steam Museum, Work Museum Mountmellick and Heritage Centre Abbeyleix</p>		
<p>Heritage Trails, Sli Dala, ancient travelling route extant in places</p>	<p>Coolbanagher Church, Emo</p>	<p>Subtle landscape of rolling hills, river basins and their floodplains, expansive flat areas, upland areas</p>
	<p>Midland Regional Hospital</p>	<p>On road and off-road walking and cycling routes open up the countryside to rural tourism</p> <p>Walks mapped on Laois Tourism www.laoistourism.ie Sli na Slainte Coillte</p>

Policy Objectives for Natural Heritage

<p>NH 1</p>	<p>Support the development and marketing of the Barrow Blueway and facilitate</p>
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	related commercial opportunities in Vicarstown, Portarlington, Graiguecullen and Portlaoise, subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive
NH 2	Support the development and marketing of the Erkina River Blueway in association with all relevant stakeholders and facilitate related commercial opportunities in the area, subject to compliance with the Habitats and Birds Directive
NH 3	<p>Promote and facilitate the continued development of the Slieve Bloom Mountains bike trail as a key tourism asset for the county and as part of the tourism offer on the Slieve Bloom Mountains, in conjunction with Offaly County Council.</p> <p>In addition, it is the Council policy to (i) promote the further development of walking trails on the mountains, (ii) connect to and develop Clonaslee, Camross, Coolrain and Rosenalis as a service hubs for the area and (iii) promote and facilitate links to / from other existing and proposed greenways, blueways and peatways (iv) Support the development of visitor centre facilities in Baunreagh, , subject to compliance with the Habitats and Birds Directive</p>

8.6 DESTINATION TOWNS

Faillte Ireland research confirms that attractive towns are a key motivator for holidaymakers in choosing Ireland as a holiday destination, as is interesting heritage, culture and friendly people. However, the challenge is to unlock the economic potential of the visitor for local businesses and communities, and deliver high quality destination town experiences for visitors, that still capture local distinctiveness and support thriving local communities.

Portlaoise has been identified by Failte Ireland's Destination Towns Initiative and has recently received €500,000 funding to enhance public spaces in the town centre in a way that will engage tourists and enhance their visitor experience not just in terms of activities but also retail and food offering and accommodation to suit all types of tourists. Portlaoise, formerly known as Maryborough, grew around the old fort constructed in 1548 built primarily for military and political purposes. The town is known for a strong arts and culture scene, along with must-visit attractions such as Fort Protector, Dunamase Theatre, and further afield to the Rock of Dunamase, its architectural conservation and protected building.

The Laois Tourism Strategy also recognises the importance on harnessing Laois' rich heritage and stories through the Laois Towns Experience Project which is an approach to devise a central story/historic theme that designated areas employ as the basis for visitor experience development. The creation of this themed approach for key tourism gateway towns across Laois will expand the experience development potential throughout the county. It is envisaged that two towns will be selected as pilot projects; among the proposed themes for initial consideration include Mountmellick (Quakers), Portarlington (French Huguenots), Mountrath (Slieve Bloom) and Stradbally (Arts).

Policy Objectives for Destination Towns

DT 1	Continue to support the promotion of Portlaoise as a Destination Town and as the principle visitor services centre and hub for Fáilte Ireland's Ancient East in the County, providing memorable and high-quality visitor experiences and providing
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	services for visitors to the range of attractions and activities in the surrounding region
DT 2	Encourage the development of Laois Towns Experience Project to promote the unique attributes of towns and villages in the County in the design and delivery of all visitor interpretation, signage and public realm schemes in order to provide tourists with a strong 'Sense of Place' and a more memorable visit
DT 3	Facilitate the enhancement and development of Portlaoise's Cultural Quarter, as a location where cultural heritage and artistic visitor attractions are clustered, offering a unique and marketable tourism proposition.
DT 4	Improve the visual appearance of towns and villages, protect their character and maximise their tourism potential by the continuance of environmental and public realm programmes, design control, development initiatives and the removal/improving of dereliction where necessary

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