

# 2021-2027

**Laois County Council**  
**Laoise Comhairle**  
**Chontae**



## **[ APPENDIX 6: Landscape Character Assessment ]**

**DRAFT Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027**  
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## **Table of Contents**

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. The Landscape of County Laois-Human Influences</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. The Landscape of County Laois-Physical Influences</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4. Landscape Trends in County Laois</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>5. Landscape Character Types</b>	<b>24</b>

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## ***How is landscape defined?***

Landscape is defined in many different ways but in current guidance there is broad agreement that it is a combination of our physical and perceived surroundings.

Department of the Environment and Local Government (DoEHLG) defines landscape as “all that is visible when looking across areas of land.”

According to the European Landscape Convention 2000 landscape is

*“An area as perceived by people, whose visual features and character are the result of the action of natural and / or cultural (that is human) factors...landscapes evolve through time as a result of being acted upon by natural forces and human beings”*

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“As a key element of individual and social well being and quality of life, landscape plays an important part in human fulfilment and in reinforcement of (European) identity. It has an important public interest role in the cultural, ecological, environmental and social fields and constitutes a resource favourable to economic activities, particularly tourism”

While the Countryside Agency, England regards

*“Landscape as about the relationship between people and place. It provides the setting for our day-to-day lives. The term does not mean just special or designated landscapes and it does not only apply to the countryside. Landscape can mean a small patch of urban wasteland or as much as a mountain range...It results from the way that different components of our environment—both natural and cultural—interact together and are perceived by us.”*

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## ***What is landscape character assessment?***

Landscape Character Assessment is a process which describes, maps and classifies landscapes objectively. It can be a tool to aid decision-making and management or simply to promote particular attractions. Defining landscape character enables an understanding to be formed of the inherent value and importance of individual landscape elements and the processes that may alter landscape character in the future. The cultural and ecological aspects of the landscape cannot be divorced from its physical and visual characteristics so all these elements are considered.

## ***Why carry out a landscape character assessment of County Laois?***

Under Planning Legislation, it is a legal requirement:

The Local Government (Planning and Development) Act 2000 (Part II, S10 (e) and 1st Schedule, Part IV (7) requires every planning authority to include objectives in their Development Plan for the “preservation of the character of the landscape where, and to the extent that...the proper planning and sustainable development of the area requires it, including the preservation of views and prospects and the amenities of places and features of natural beauty or interest”

- Ireland ratified the European Landscape Convention in 2002 and must adopt national measures to promote landscape planning, protection and management.

The **National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025** sets out a number of actions which national -government are committed to. These include the production of a National Landscape Character Assessment, a National Landscape Character Map and Section 28 Guidelines on local landscape character assessments. Once the above has been completed local authorities will be required to prepare individual landscape character assessments for their functional areas.

### **Context influencing the Landscape Character - Assessment of County Laois**

The Landscape Character Assessment and the Development Plan will be informed by existing national, regional and local planning documents and policies including the following

- European Landscape Convention 2000,
- DoEHLG *Landscape and Landscape Assessment: Consultation Draft of Guidelines for Planning Authorities, 2000*, and other guidelines relating to architectural heritage, including Conservation Areas and Setting of Protected Structures,
- Project Ireland 2040 – is the overarching strategy to make Ireland a better country for all its people through the development of physical infrastructure and supporting business and communities.
- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midlands Assembly area. This plan identifies discrepancies in approach between counties in preparing LCAs. It recognizes the need for a national landscape character assessment to provide consistency in approach and a framework for regional and local landscape character assessments.
- Laois County Council's County Development Plan 2017-2023 and current review of the Plan,
- Landscape character assessment of adjoining local authorities, if available; of the five counties bordering Laois each has completed landscape character assessments: North Tipperary, Kilkenny, Offaly, Carlow and Kildare.

### **KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT:**

1. To improve the understanding of the landscape in County Laois in terms of its inherent and unique character and to

identify what key elements should be preserved, conserved or enhanced.

2. To predict the broad pattern of future changes and devise policies and objectives as guidance to planners and other parties which will ensure that change is complimentary to landscape character. Sensitivity and capacity should be given due consideration in all aspects of decision-making.
3. To assist in the achievement of sustainable development, the underlying principle of all current planning practice and legislation, by promoting a unified approach to landscape planning and management which links policies and recommendations for landscape character to existing planning policies.

Laois County Council is currently reviewing it's County Development Plan which will include policies for landscape protection and conservation. This Landscape Character Assessment will form supplementary guidance providing a detailed understanding of the landscapes in County Laois during the period of the Development Plan 2021-2027.

### **How is Landscape Character Assessment carried out?**

This Landscape Character Assessment describes the landscape of Co. Laois including:

- *Physical elements* - landform, land cover, geology, vegetation cover, hydrology and ecology.
- *Visual characteristics* - type and extent of views, enclosure and patterns formed by physical elements.
- *Less tangible aspects* such as historical and cultural associations, archaeology, remoteness, tranquillity and aesthetic quality.

### **POLICIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Policies have been formulated to assist the development of related planning policies, promotion of strategies and development management within the county. They are intended to protect and enhance landscape character, and facilitate and guide sensitively designed development. Policies are general in nature and are concerned with broad principles of good practice. The aim of the suggested policies is to enhance and maintain landscape character within the broader goal of accommodating development in a sustainable manner.

## **CONSULTATION**

There was public consultation alongside statutory consultation [for example with DoEHLG] for the County Development Plan. Where necessary, the Landscape Character Assessment was amended to take account of relevant comments made during this period.

## **2 THE LANDSCAPE OF COUNTY LAOIS-HUMAN INFLUENCES**

### ***2.1 Overview***

In this section, an overview is provided of past human activity in County Laois, the influence of past practices on the landscape and the extent to which archaeological and historic elements survive in, or influence, the modern landscape.

### ***2.2 Prehistoric Laois***

County Laois has a rich and varied landscape with historic features dating back to prehistory and many well-known tourist attractions that are related to its heritage. The county retains a strong connection with traditional agriculture and the landscape supports a wide range of ecological habitats despite recent rapid growth of its settlements. It is the interaction of these elements that will influence landscape character for future generations.

The relatively accessible landform of County Laois together with its network of navigable river corridors, encouraged successive waves of visitors to settle in the county over time. The earliest people in County Laois were small bands of Mesolithic migratory hunters-fishers-gatherers who appeared about 8500 years ago. Neolithic farmers followed and left burial mounds in Clonaslee and Cuffsborough and artifacts such as a chert javelin head near Glenkitt in Slieve Bloom

The early Bronze Age was characterised by a considerable expansion of settlement in the county. The people of this era preferred well drained lightly forested upland pastures. These lightly forested slopes were easier to clear with the available technology and the cleared soil was worked until depleted. Pasture and cattle raising was the key to the Bronze Age economy in the county. The improved technology associated with the Bronze Age also assisted the farmers in improving control over their

environment, by more extensive farming practices and forestry clearances.

The late Bronze Age is characterised by increased deposition of hoards and this may represent a general response to climatic deterioration in the latter half of the second millennium. During this period, climate change and the impacts of farming are believed to have been partially responsible for the development and spread of blanket bog; tree regeneration was hampered by farming practices and soils became wetter, less well drained and more conducive to peat creation.

Surviving from the Bronze Age settlers are examples of the fulacht fiadh or cooking place, weaponry, ornaments and hill forts such as Clopook and Monelly. Their megalithic monuments may include the Ass's Manger (possibly a wedge tomb near Luggacurren, a stone circle in nearby Monamony ("Druid's Altar"), and the standing stone in the motte and ring fort at Skirke near Borris-in-Ossory.

The pre-Christian Celtic Iron Age is one of bloody conquest by a succession of ruling dynasties. Iron Age activity in the county is largely derived from ring barrows [at Ballydavis] and forts, and a wealth of heroic literature originally in oral form. A marked decline in agricultural activity suggests a contraction in settlement during the Iron Age.

By the first century AD, Laois was part of the Kingdom of Ossory. The county was divided roughly into seven parts, which were ruled by the Seven Septs of Laois: O'More (O'Moore), O'Lalor, O'Doran, O'Dowling, O'Devoy (O'Deevy), O'Kelly and McEvoy.

### **2.3 Christianity**

With the advent of Christianity, religious communities became established in the county. Between 550 and 600, St. Canice founded Aghaboe Abbey and St. Mochua set up a religious community at Timahoe. An early

Christian community lived at Dun Masc or Masc's fort, on the Rock of Dunamase.

### **Timahoe Round Tower**



The introduction of Christianity also facilitated closer contacts with the Roman world, easing the transfer and spread of technologies such as new ploughs and the horizontal mill. These technologies improved agricultural productivity and encouraged population increases. Population expansion led to the on-going construction of ringforts and raths. These may be identified as banks marking the perimeter of enclosed single farmsteads involved in a principally pastoral economy. They are typically sited on sloping sites within lowland areas where there was access to better drained soils and views over the surrounding landscape. Crannogs were broadly contemporary with ringforts and raths, occupying semi-artificial islands of timber, sods and stones. To date, no crannogs have been identified within County Laois possible due to the lack of major surface water features within the county.

### **2.4 Medieval Laois**

After 1150, the continental Roman Catholic Church began to assert its authority over the independent churches of Ireland. As religious orders with strong ties to Rome replaced older religious communities, the wooden buildings of the early Christian churches in Laois gave way to stone monasteries. The Augustinians and

Dominicans established themselves at Aghaboe Abbey, while the Cistercians took over an older religious community at Abbeyleix. The Cistercians played a significant role in agricultural development and divided monastic lands into farms or granges. They also modified the landscape considerably, clearing woodlands and reclaiming wetlands. Their preference for richer, freely draining soils better suited for cultivation remained throughout the Norman period.

Aghaboe Abbey



Around the same time, the Normans seized control of most of Ireland. In Laois, the fortress on the Rock of Dunamase was part of the dowry of the Irish princess Aoife, who was given in marriage in 1170 to the Norman warrior Strongbow. Advancing Normans surveyed the county from wooden towers built on top of earthen mounds, known as mottes. They also built stone fortresses, such as Lea Castle outside Portarlinton.

Rock of Dunamase C.1250



Several of the county's towns were first established as Norman boroughs, including Castletown, Durrow and Timahoe. From 1175 until about 1325, Normans controlled the best land in the county, while Gaelic society retreated to the bogs, forests and the Slieve Bloom Mountains. The early 14th century saw a Gaelic revival and a simultaneous decline in Norman influence. The Dempseys seized Lea Castle, while Dunamase came into the ownership of the O'Mores. Tower houses belonging to Irish chieftains of this era survive at Ballaghmore and Cullahill, both decorated with Sheila-na-gigs.

### ***2.5 Post-Medieval Laois***

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed two colonisations by English forces. The first occurred in 1556, when Thomas Radclyffe, 3rd Earl of Sussex dispossessed the O'Moores and attempted to replace them with English settlers. This led to a long drawn-out guerilla war in the county and resulted in a small English community clustered around garrisons. There was a much more widespread and successful plantation in the county in the 17th century which expanded the existing English settlement with more landowners and tenants from England. After the Battle of Kinsale in 1601 the Gaelic order collapsed. By 1610 the seven septs of Laois, their wider families and retainers were transplanted to remote parts of Connacht and Munster. The rest of the century saw further reduction of Roman Catholic landowning in the county reinforced by the Penal Laws.

The new settlers were eager for agricultural improvement and landlord demesnes. As the seventeenth century progressed, the estate system spread throughout most of the populated, good to moderate lands of the county. A feature of this period is how much of the earlier settlement evidence is now supplanted by landlord demesnes, in the eastern half of the county especially.

Among the new colonists to the county were two religious groupings, the Huguenots and Quakers who settled in Portarlinton and Mountmellick respectively in the latter part of the seventeenth century and made major contributions to County Laois in terms of their social, cultural, economic and architectural endeavours.

The plantation marked a new era of landscape change centred on the demesne and influenced by prevalent concepts concerning agricultural improvement operating within a reformed and rationalised field system. The settlers embraced new crops, planting of deciduous trees, improved cattle and sheep breeds and agricultural techniques including liming, drainage and enclosure. Agricultural improvements and demesne creation was facilitated by a rent paying tenantry.

Industrial interests also gave settlers the confidence and resources to establish estates and large unfortified residences. The defensive bawns were replaced by walled gardens. Accompanying this was an enthusiasm for lavish houses, with ornate gardens. Once the natural landscape design associated with Capability Brown became dominant, there was a shift in the location of houses to the more scenic upland, woodland and riverside locations. The greatest period of “Big House” and demesne creation in County Laois was between 1770 and 1840 when many of the county's finest houses including Abbeyleix House, Ballyfin House, Durrow Castle and Emo Court were built. In 1836, a branch of the Grand Canal was extended to Mountmellick, further stimulating industry in that town. Other landscape additions in this period include the glebe house, Protestant churches and police barracks.

## 2.6 Pre-Famine Laois

The decades prior to the Famine were characterized by relative calm, consolidation, enclosure and landscaping.

In an extract from *The New London Gazetteer* (1826)] Laois was described as follows:

*“Queen's County, a **county** of Ireland, bounded N and W by King's county, E by Kildare and part of Carlow, S by Kilkenny, and SW by Tipperary, 32 English m. long, and as many broad. Along the W boundary runs a range of high and steep mountains, and in the E the Dysart hills form a prominent and picturesque object. The lands have been thus distributed - Arable land, pasture, and meadow: 210,000 acres; Woods and plantations: 1,300 acres; Bog, mountain, and waste: 21,000 acres; Roads: 2,000 acres; Total area: 235,300 acres. Principle rivers, the Barrow and Nore. Chief towns, Maryborough, Portarlinton, and Stradbally. Almost every description of soil is found in this county, from a very stiff clay, to a light but fertile sandy loam. The principal mineral productions are coal and limestone. It sends 3 members to the British parliament. Pop. 90,000.”*

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Abbeyleix House and Demesne





Durrow Castle



Emo Court



Ballyfin House and Demesne



By the 1840's the population of County Laois was three times its present number. Then came the Great Famine of 1845–9 which had a devastating impact on the county. The opening of the workhouse at Donaghmore and the many small ruined houses especially in the foothills of the Slieve Bloom Mountains bear testimony to this calamity.

### ***2.7 Post-Famine Laois***

The policy approach to the famine was informed by an initial desire to rid the agricultural system of its perceived backwardness and obstacles to agricultural modernisation. Hence, in particular, small farmers were targeted and through the ratings clauses, large numbers of smallholders were evicted. This clearing of the land, combined with the introduction of ladder fields as a means to rationalise land ownership, removed many of the earlier field systems within the county. Accompanying developments that had a major landscape impact were the overwhelming increase in pasture at the expense of tillage and the consolidation of large scale farmers who tended to rent the limestone rich pastures, whilst the remaining farmers most frequently had to contend with producing on marginal land.

In the aftermath of the famine, strong farmers and landlords increased their holdings at the expense of weaker neighbours, and the pastoral sector increased, helped by the development of the railways and expanding English markets.

A combination of declining numbers of landlords, in large part due to the increasing assertion of agrarian rights and a less sympathetic governmental regime, and the establishment of the Land Commission resulted in many landlords transferring their land to former tenants with a consequent decline in the extent of many estate holdings. The War of Independence, and the Civil War that followed it, also led to many perceived symbols of the

landlords' reign being destroyed during this period.

## **2.8 Post-Independence**

Following independence, land reform is thought to have contributed to an increase in the division of land as former tenants sought to define the boundaries of their newly acquired freeholds. The introduction of rural electrification and group water schemes had both social and landscape impacts in North County Laois with significant improvements on the quality of life for rural householders, as well as the introduction into the landscape of water treatment facilities, reservoirs and electricity poles and pylons.

The economic emergence of Ireland over the last forty years, particularly following the state's entry into the EEC in 1973, has had a profound influence upon the social, economic and physical development of the county.

Today, agriculture remains the predominant land use in County Laois with 109,424 ha under agricultural production. Dairying and cattle rearing remain the key agricultural activity. Associated with the changes in the agricultural sector within the county, is an increase in part time farmers and the accompanying decline in farm employment. This loss of labour is often particularly acute with regard to the traditional maintenance and management of key agricultural landscape features such as hedgerows and ditches. However, programmes such as the Rural Environment Protection Scheme and the recent CAP reforms are again stressing the links between agricultural activity and landscape maintenance.

Whilst the county retains a rural landscape, the pace of change over the past thirty years, in landscape and social terms, has been considerable. Although parts of the county [especially the north and east] are under development pressure in the form of housing requirements, other parts [the west and south]

are suffering population stagnation, decline and associated loss of rural services. Human activities will continue to play the most influential role in landscape retention and change, whether through continued agricultural decline, rural diversification in the form of increased afforestation or development of golf courses, the exploitation of natural resources such as wind farming, aggregates and peat extraction and the roll-out of large infrastructure projects.

### 3. THE LANDSCAPE OF COUNTY LAOIS-PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

#### *Introduction*

This section of the Landscape Character Assessment provides a brief overview of the elements which form the landscape character of County Laois. Laois is an inland county, entirely landlocked and, uniquely amongst Irish counties does not border any other counties with a sea coast

In order to understand the landscapes within County Laois, it is necessary to outline the physical and historical influences that have created the contemporary landscape.

The interplay between bedrock or solid geology, glacial processes, soil formation, hydrology and ecology has formed the basic materials upon which human activities have impacted. This is a constant and ongoing inter-relationship with topography, access to water and soil conditions influencing the spatial distribution and types of human activities practiced within the county over the past several millennia.

Although human habitation has been the most recent landscape influence, in many ways it has been the most profound. Patterns of land ownership, settlement development, agricultural and ritual activities have all been modified in response to local variations of biotic and abiotic elements and constraints. A description of the physical landscape of County Laois is presented below and is followed by an overview and analysis of human activities within the County Laois landscape from prehistoric to contemporary times.

#### **3.1 Solid Geology**

The underlying geology of County Laois is formed from two principal rock formations, each rock type generally being associated with particular landscapes.

Much of the county is composed of limestone lowlands from the lower Carboniferous Series (approximately 325 million years ago), and generally covered by glacial deposited sediments. The limestone in this area supports generally good quality pastoral farmland but in other areas such as Cul na Mona [between Portlaoise, Mountrath and Abbeyleix] and the southwestern boundary with County Tipperary, the poorly drained geology has led to the creation of peatland areas since the end of the last glacial period in Ireland (approximately 10,000 years ago, the Midlandian period).

Elsewhere within the county, blocks of harder, less easily eroded limestone create distinct landscape elements within the wider, flatter limestone surround, by forming small hills and stretches of limestone ridges.

**In themselves, such hills and ridges are not particularly elevated, (commonly around 200m OD); however they create visual interest in an otherwise low lying area.** Examples of these limestone ridges can be found east of Portlaoise

The mountains and hills that rise above these lower areas are composed of a variety of older rocks of differing age and composition. Old Red Sandstone is generally found around the perimeter of these uplands, whilst the interiors are formed by far older Lower Palaeozoic rocks, largely composed of greywacke, mudstone, and slate.

Old Red Sandstone is a tough rock, resistant to erosive influences and this characteristic generally creates upland moorland or blanket bog at the summits of these areas. The Sliabh Bloom Mountains formation is considered to contain the greatest concentration of Old Red Sandstone rocks in the South Midlands.

#### **3.2 Effects of Glaciation**

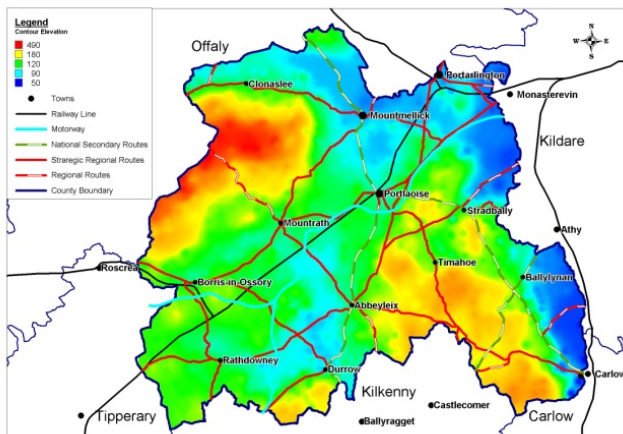
Glacial deposition rather than erosion has been the major landscape influence within the

county. However, there are two areas that clearly display the influence of erosive factors. The uplands were eroded as the Midlandian ice sheets moved in a general southerly direction. Elsewhere glacial deposits led to deposits of boulders, pebble, sand and mud and thereafter their smoothing and rounding over by ice.

### 3.3 Topography and Drainage

Upland areas and hills within the county provide interest and contrast with the largely central lowland areas. Map 1 illustrates the topography of the county. These uplands are concentrated in the north-western and southern parts of the County and include the Sliabh Bloom Mountains [containing the highest summits in the county], Cullahill Mountain, Cullenagh Mountain, Fossy Mountain and Killeshin Hills.

**Map 1: Contour Map of County Laois**



Drainage in the county is largely defined by the Rivers Barrow, Nore and Erkina and their various tributaries mainly flowing in a north west - south east trajectory. Apart from minor [man-made] ones at Ballyfin, Grantstown, and Heywood, there are no significant natural lakes in the county reflecting the lack of drumlins to capture waterbodies and the predominantly limestone bedrock.

The water table in the low lying areas is generally very close to the ground surface with the exception of the harder limestone ridges and hills. The water table in the uplands varies considerably depending on seasonality and may be within a few metres of ground level in winter, dropping to more than 20m below ground in the summer months.

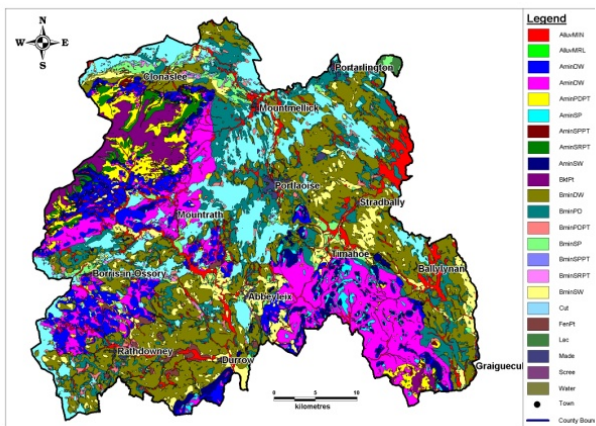
### 3.4 Soils

In County Laois, the various types of soil have developed from a combination of numerous factors, most notably topography, climate and geological parent material. The principal soil types identified within the county are illustrated in Map 2. Of the nine principal soil types (great soil groups) identified in the National Soil Survey, the most commonly occurring type or group is the grey brown podzol. This type is located mainly in the southwest [Abbeyleix, Ballacolla, Rathdowney, Shanahoe areas] and east [Stradbally, Ballynynan areas] of the county. Geologically, this soil is derived from glacial till composed generally of limestone. It has a heavy texture although the structure is sufficiently good to facilitate drainage. The soil type is suited to most agricultural enterprises although the heavier textured types in this category are more poorly drained and therefore primarily suited to pastoral uses.

The next most frequently occurring soil type is the gley which is generally found in the southeast [Bilboa, Rossmore, Killeshin, Timahoe areas] and low lying ground in parts of the west [Ballybrophy, Borris-in-Ossory areas] of the county. Glacial till comprising mostly shales is the foundation geology for this soil type. In terms of agricultural uses, this soil type is limited largely due to weak structure and poor drainage characteristics. Pastoral uses can be considered although this activity is restricted by the vulnerability of this soil type to poaching by livestock. In addition, these soils are likely to be highly productive from a forestry cropping standpoint.

Peat soil types account for just over 17% of the soil cover in the county. Much of this is associated with the raised bogs on the southwestern eastern edge of the county, in the central areas around Portlaoise, Mountrath, Mountmellick and Abbeyleix and further north in the foothills of the Sliabh Blooms. This soil type is not suited to commercial agriculture. However it does offer considerable potential in terms of afforestation, and increasingly amenity [as in Lough Boora in County Offaly] and green energy. Regarding green energy, there is a current planning application with the Council for a wind farm project on a section of worked-out bogland southwest of Rathdowney.

**Map 2 Soil Types Of County Laois**



**Table 1: No. of Farms Classified by Farm Size (AAU) at County Level**

Location	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-50	50-100	100+	Total	Average Farm Size
County Laois	528	605	557	783	698	141	3312	37

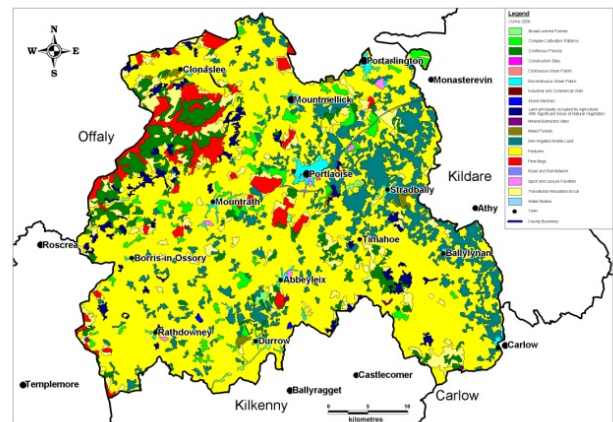
Pastoralism, with an emphasis on beef production, is the predominant agricultural activity in County Laois, with 59% of the county's farmers engaged in this form of enterprise. A further 11% concentrate on dairying. There are a number of specialist areas of agricultural production in the county. For example, tillage farming is most common in the east and north bordering Carlow and Kildare with dairying most evident in the south.

The composition of farm household income is changing too, making off farm employment and the development of alternative enterprises necessary to ensure survival. There are 344 no. farms reporting gainful non-agricultural activity on the farm and for a significant number of farmers in Co. Laois (28%), conventional farming is now regarded only as a part time or a subsidiary occupation.

**Map 3: Corine Landuse Map of County Laois**

**3.5 Landuse**

Agriculture is the predominant landuse in the county. According to the 2010 census of agriculture, the average farm size in County Laois is 37 hectares, which is higher than the national average of 33 hectares. There are 3,312 farms in County Laois of which 50% are less than 30 hectares in size. Furthermore, 52% of the land in the county is designated as disadvantaged.



### 3.6 Afforestation

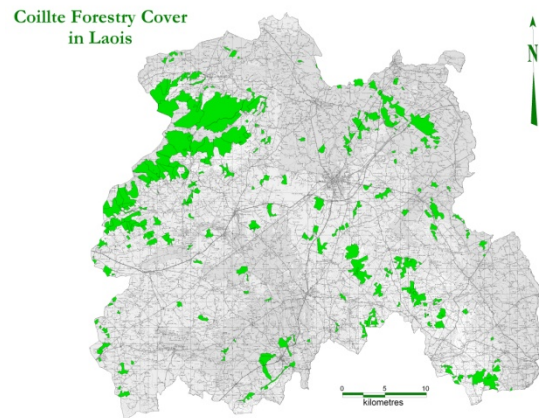
One alternative rural enterprise in County Laois which is proving increasingly attractive for farmers and investment companies alike is afforestation. Almost 15% of Co. Laois is forested comprising 4,430 hectares of private plantings and 15,950 hectares mainly undertaken by Coillte. There was a major afforestation programme implemented between 1984 and 2004 when 6,578 hectares of land was planted. The majority of the schemes to date have been in the upland more marginal areas of the county [areas that incidentally often coincide with amenity and natural heritage designations] with heavy concentrations in the Sliabh Boom Mountains, Cullenagh Mountain, between Ballybrittas and Vicarstown and in the southeast around Swan, Wolfhill, Rossmore and Crettyard.

There are also 4,990 hectares of native woodland in County Laois. Broadleaf woodland and copses are more prevalent in lowland areas and mature trees encircle many historic features such as raths and historic graveyards, forming prominent and attractive landscape elements. Remnants of old estate woods and ornamental plantations are still evident in a number of locations throughout the county. In general the county is reasonably well furnished with deciduous tree species. Beech, elm, ash, poplar, sycamore and alder are all still in abundance with oak present to a lesser degree. Forty-five constituent sites were surveyed as part of the National Survey of Native Woodland [BEC Consultants 2003-2008]. The optimum sites in terms of native woodland conservation value include Ballyfin Demesne, Dunmore Demesne, Emo Court and Grantstown Wood.

From a landscape perspective, afforestation can have major negative implications for the environment especially where the predominant species type is of a coniferous variety as is the case with the majority of the locations in County Laois.

It is vital that an holistic approach is adopted in terms of additional and replacement afforestation throughout the county so that visual amenity, biodiversity, habitat protection, water quality and tourism promotion are afforded due consideration as well.

**Map 4: Coillte Plantations in County Laois**



Landscape management in rural areas varies. It is generally most intensive around commercial tillage farms in the east which have a manicured appearance, but becomes less intensive in the more marginal farmland areas of the northwest and southeast and very poor around the fringes of expanding urban areas where farming is under threat and becoming a less viable industry. The rural landscape contains numerous trees growing often as mature stands or shelterbelts and within hedgerows.

Hedgerows vary in terms of style, form and species content but are generally well managed along road corridors becoming less well maintained in between fields. In many areas hedgerows have been lost and replaced with post and wire fences, giving the countryside a much more open character and contributing to decline in landscape condition.

Deep drainage ditches are a distinguishing feature along many rural roads particularly in peatland areas. Stonewalls, cylindrical stone gateposts and iron gates are also common boundary treatments.

### 3.7 Extractive Industry

Mineral extraction is a significant industry and demand for aggregates is certain to continue. There are already a large number of quarries and pits in County Laois and large areas identified as having high aggregate potential, particularly in the south of the county. There are also the remnants of slag heaps associated with the now defunct coal mining industry centred on Wolfhill and Rossmore. Any future development must be carefully planned to avoid unnecessary adverse landscape impacts.

### 3.8 Ecology and Habitats

County Laois has a rich natural heritage that includes scenic river valleys, rolling farmland, uplands, watercourses and a network of mature hedgerows all of which are influenced by land use and management. National Heritage Areas (NHA's) were derived from the former Areas of Scientific Interest (ASI's) and include the best remaining areas of Irelands natural and semi-natural habitats.

Sites have been selected by virtue of having special scientific significance for one or more species, communities, habitats, landforms, or geological or geomorphological features, or for a diversity of natural attributes. There are currently 31 NHA's in County Laois.

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's) are designated under the European Community Habitats Directive to maintain biodiversity and restore the conservation status of certain species of flora and fauna. Areas in County Laois that support rare, endangered or vulnerable species that require special protection and positive habitat management have been identified as SAC's. There are currently 9 SAC's in County Laois.

Special Protection Areas (SPA's) are areas designated under the European Community Birds Directive for the protection of birds and

their habitats. There is one SPA in County Laois: the Sliabh Bloom Mountains in the northwest of the county bordering Counties Offaly and Tipperary

The following are the locations of the existing and proposed NHA's, SAC's and SPA's in County Laois:-

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) in County Laois (as identified on Map No. 5) Site Name	Site Code	1/2" Map Number
River Barrow And River Nore	002162	
Clonaslee Eskers and Derry Bog	000859	38
Lisbigney Bog	000869	44
Mountmellick	002141	
Slieve Bloom Mountains	000412	38/44
Coolrain Bog	002332	
Knockacollier Bog	002333	

## Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) in Co Laois (as identified on Map No. 5)

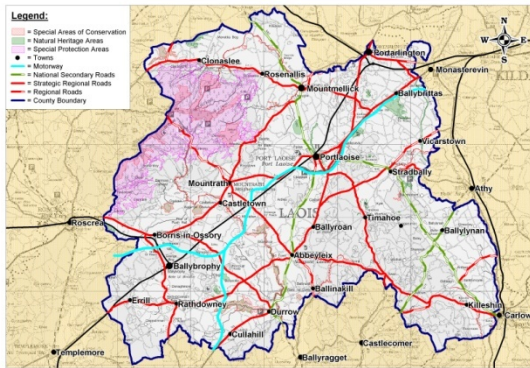
Site Name	Site Code	Main habitat or species
Annaghmore Lough Fen	000413	Calcareous fen with willow and birch scrub
Ballylynan	000857	Grassland, wet meadows
Barrow Valley At Tankardstown Bridge	000858	River, canal, grassland, marsh
Clonaslee Eskers And Derry Bog	000859	Esker, raised bog
Clonreher Bog	2357	Raised bog
Cloppook Wood	000860	Ash/hazel woodland, limestone hill
Coolacurragh Wood	000862	Birch/alder woodland, fen peat
Coolrain Bog	000415	Midland raised bog (with Knockacollier Bog, these two bogs are the most southerly intact examples of true Midland Raised Bogs in the country)
Cuffsborough	000418	Grassland used by Greenland White-fronted geese
The Curragh And Goul River Marsh	000420	Wet meadow, river, winter feeding site for Greenland White-fronted Geese
Delour River Nr Lacca Manor	000864	Oak/birch woodland, river, wet grassland
Derries Wood	000416	Disturbed raised bog, disused gravel pit, conifer plantation, lake, reedbed, important insect populations
Dunamaise Woods	001494	Limestone hills, oak/ash woodland
Emo Court	000865	Semi-natural mixed (oak/ash with beech) woodland, lake, parkland, amenity grassland
Forest House Wood	000874	
Grand Canal	002104	Canal, wetland, grassland
Grantstown Wood and Lough	000417	State-owned nature reserve. Lake in transition through fen to alder/willow. Important invertebrate fauna
Kilteale Hill	000867	Limestone hill, hazel/ash woodland
Knockacollier Bog	000419	Midland raised bog, Birch and alder woodland. One of the few intact bogs south of the Slieve Blooms
Lisbigney Bog	000869	Raised bog
Mannin Wetland	00868	Species-rich fen
Monaincha Bog/ Ballaghmore Bog	00652	Raised bog
Ridge Of Portlaoise	000876	Esker ridge, ash/hazel woodland, species-rich grassland, disused gravel pits
River Barrow And River Nore	002162	River, wetland, woodland
River Nore/Abbeyleix Woods Complex	002076	River, site for Freshwater Pearl Mussel (international importance), Twaite Shad (Vulnerable), wet grassland, mixed deciduous woodland of great antiquity and species diversity, with specimen oak
Rock of Dunamaise	000878	
Shanahoe Marsh	001923	
Slieve Bloom Mountains	000412	Old Red Sandstone mountains, mountain blanket bog, Peregrine Falcon, Hen harrier, red grouse
Stradbally Hill	001800	
Timahoe Esker	000421	Esker ridge, Hazel/Ash woodland



Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in Co Laois (as identified on Map No. 5)

Site Name	Site Code	Main habitat or species
Slieve Bloom Mountains	004160	Whooper Swan, Corncrake, Hen Harrier, Merlin, Peregrine

**Map 5: Natural Heritage Designations**



### 3.9 Settlement and Built Heritage

County Laois has an impressive built heritage. The three main towns, of Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Mountmellick have relatively intact cores while Abbeyleix is designated as a Heritage Town. There are many other urban settlements across the county that are significant in terms of built heritage and cultural associations including the villages of Ballinakill and Timahoe which was the site of an abbey founded by St Mochua in the 6th Century.

Nonetheless, the historic structure of urban settlements in the county is under threat from unprecedented population growth. Urban areas are expanding, particularly in northern and eastern areas due to their proximity to the Dublin metropolitan area. Many settlements such as Portlaoise and Portarlinton have grown in size at such a rate that the historic centres are in danger of becoming detached from the majority of their populations and the relationship between urban area and landscape setting is being threatened.

Further development of towns and villages must be carefully planned to avoid creating linear extensions of large scale housing on approaches to towns and villages. Collectively this type of development has the potential to threaten the rural character of the whole county.

One-off house rural housing is a major issue throughout County Laois with particularly strong concentrations in the north and east of the county and in the vicinity of all the main urban settlements. An appropriate planning response is necessary to avoid houses being built that are out of character within the rural context. The Regional Economic and Spatial Strategy (RSES) have identified a hierarchy of settlements in order to accommodate development in the best way possible. The Council's interpretation of the RSES through planning policy will seek to promote the retention and enhancement of the identity of individual settlements including landscape setting and avoiding further loss of character. The rural housing policy of Laois County Council will also seek to limit the impact of one off rural housing on the landscape. One of the base criteria is the quality of the design of one-off houses and their potential impact on landscape character.

### 3.10 Infrastructure

Development pressure from the Dublin Metropolitan Area and recent road and rail improvements have led to increased commuting between County Laois and Dublin. This has placed greater pressure on county roads that link primary road corridors.

Current planning policy is to create an integrated public transport system and reduce the need and demand for travel, particularly by private car. Improvements to public transport networks will be carried out alongside road improvements to facilitate more sustainable and efficient commuting whilst also improving

local employment opportunities to reduce the need to commute in the long term.

Upgrading of the rail infrastructure will alleviate some pressure on rural roads in the county. The opportunity for further rail networks elsewhere in the county would increase sustainable transport provision but it is crucial that any new and reopened rail lines are designed to reflect landscape character and minimise the loss of existing landscape character elements such as vegetation and archaeology.

Rapid urban expansion has also put existing water and wastewater services under pressure. In many of the county's towns the capacity of treatment plants has been reached and exceeded. This is posing implications for further economic development. Improvements to this element of infrastructure will be an integral objective of the new Development Plan.

The continued growth of County Laois is putting current energy generation under significant strain and there are a number of planned improvements to electrical infrastructure over the life of the new County Development Plan. These include new transmission lines and opening of a major substation between Portlaoise and Timahoe.

Renewable energy provision in Laois is a priority having regard to local, regional and national policy. The wind energy strategy of this plan has identified a number of areas in the county with potential for wind energy generation.

Telecommunications Infrastructure is becoming a critical factor in order to deliver on the future requirements for a sustainable County and address economic competitiveness, connectivity and social inclusion.

It is Council policy that masts should avoid areas of high visual value or archaeological importance and be co-located where feasible.

### **3.11 Tourism**

County Laois has significant tourist potential in its own right. Rich in contrast, there is provision for a wide range of outdoor active pursuits including golfing, walking, vintage car-rallies, music events, heritage tours and equestrian sports.

Emo Court and Gardens, Heywood Gardens, Rock of Dunamais, Donaghmore Famine Museum, Sliabh Bloom Mountains and associated mountain bike trail and Abbeyleix Heritage House are the main tourist destinations in the county.

Improved transport infrastructure, particularly links to the Greater Dublin Area means that Laois is a very accessible and attractive destination for short breaks for visitors in Ireland or as part of a longer stay by visitors from abroad.

Future proposals to increase the tourism product at many of these sites will require sensitive siting and consideration for the landscape within which it needs to be integrated.

## 4. LANDSCAPE TRENDS IN COUNTY LAOIS

Landscape trends have been identified to predict the broad pattern of future changes and devise policies and objectives which will assist in ensuring that change is complimentary to landscape character. The main forces for change which are causing changes to the overall appearance, function and condition of the landscape are categorised under the following headings: settlements and built structures, infrastructure and industry, tourism, rivers and canals, agriculture and tree cover.

The most likely forms of future development are derived from these landscape trends.

### **Introduction**

The landscapes in County Laois are constantly evolving in response to natural forces and human activity. Glacial movement shaped the topography into its present form and mans activities have been largely responsible for land cover since farming began around the 4th Century. There have been several phases of history which have left their marks on the landscape and which are evident today such as a patchwork of elements including passage tombs and pre Christian earthworks, early Christian ecclesiastical buildings, Norman castles and walled settlements, 17th – 18th Century demesnes and field patterns and 18th – 19th Century buildings and structures.

Today the pressures of change continue apace. Whilst many changes are a result of economic necessity, crucial to the development of the county, the impacts on landscape character are potentially very damaging.

This Landscape Character Assessment seeks to recognise what is valuable and what elements should be preserved, conserved or enhanced. It also aims to predict the broad pattern of future changes and devise policies and objectives

which will assist in ensuring that change is complimentary to landscape character.

The main forces for change which are causing changes to the overall appearance, function and condition of the landscape can be categorised as follows:

- *Settlements, Built Structures and Population Growth*
- *Infrastructure and Industry*
- *Tourism*
- *Rivers and Canals*
- *Agriculture*
- *Tree Cover*

### **4.1 Settlements, Built Structures and Population Growth**

The growth of urban areas and built development is the strongest trend that has, is and will continue to influence landscape character in County Laois. The strength of this trend will also have a knock-on effect on all other factors that influence landscape character such as infrastructure and industry, tourism, water bodies, agriculture and vegetation.

Most settlements in the county, and particularly those in the north and east, have undergone rapid expansion of modern residential development. This trend is set to continue and has the potential to permanently alter landscape character in and adjacent to urban fringe areas.

The historic character which is highly evident in most settlements, large and small, is being diluted by new development which adheres less to the local vernacular and is more homogenous in appearance and layout.

Sporadic one-off houses in rural areas are becoming more common and are also causing dilution of rural character where it has been located insensitively. However, the desire of people to live in remoter areas could potentially give rise to opportunities to reverse the

dereliction of traditional buildings by finding new uses for them.

#### **4.2 Infrastructure and Industry**

Large scale infrastructure development such as motorway projects, waste water treatment works etc resulting directly from population growth in the county, will have major effects on landscape and visual character which will be difficult to mitigate against because of the scale of such development. Sensitive choice of location is likely to be the most important factor that will limit negative impacts on the wider landscape. Design of boundaries may also aid integration at a very local level.

Ongoing planned extension to infrastructure networks (electricity, water and sewage, communications, Transport etc) is associated with population growth and the demand for greater service capacities. These are causing often small-scale loss of features and character which, when seen together have a potentially significant cumulative effect on landscape character.

To date there is little renewable energy provision in County Laois but it is a priority policy at all levels of government and is being promoted to meet part of the county's increased energy requirements. Wind, solar and to a lesser degree hydro energy are likely to be particularly viable because of the county's water and wind resources but other forms of renewable energy, such as bio-energy and biomass are also potential contributors in this regard.

Bio-energy has the potential to assist diversification and enhancement of the rural economy but may result in reduced biodiversity through the planting of large-scale single species plantations. These would have a similar landscape effect to commercial forestry.

Biomass is likely to be a scale that will be visually prominent so care should be taken in design of its location, layout and setting.

Wind energy is also a visually prominent form of development and should be located away from highly sensitive landscapes and those of exceptional value. One landscape character type in the county being considered for this form of development is harvested peatland. While substantially lower than hill and mountain locations, the potential landscape impact will still need careful appraisal.

Solar energy has a significantly lower impact on the landscape from a visual perspective. However, there is potential that owing to scale, orientation and contours of the land that this form of development would have a negative impact on the landscape. Care is therefore needed in the assessment of applications to minimize the impact. In general upland areas should be avoided for this type of development.

Hydro energy will be related to water bodies so care should be taken to avoid adverse impacts on national and European designated ecological sites and other existing uses that are complimentary to the maintenance of attractive and valuable river corridors.

The demand for aggregates will continue with increased development of the county. It is likely that quarries may be extended or new areas for mineral extraction created to meet demand.

#### **4.3 Tourism**

Expansion and promotion of the tourism sector in the county is a key Council strategy. There are potential opportunities to raise awareness of the wealth of visitor attractions that exist in the county in addition to the key established sites such as the Sliabh Blooms, Emo Court and Rock of Dunamais.

Improved visitor facilities will be required to enhance visitor experiences. These may include

additional parking areas, picnic sites, signage etc that should be sensitively designed to avoid visual clutter in scenic landscapes.

There are some instances of historic buildings, such as 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century estate houses in the countryside, for example Roundwood House, Mountrath, being converted to new uses and this trend is likely to continue. It provides a good opportunity to restore landscape character to previously degraded sites and introduce new sustainable uses which will maintain this character in the long term. It is important that all such work be done sensitively and with respect paid to vernacular features, materials, scale and landscape setting.

#### **4.4 Rivers and Canals**

Historically rivers were the focus of human settlement and all of the county's large towns-Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Mountmellick, Mountrath, Graiguecullen, Rathdowney, Stradbally-have grown up around river corridors. Today most have some form of ecological designation as well as significant associated cultural features and, as such are particularly sensitive to change.

Increased run-off from urban areas, and increased demand for abstraction and waste water facilities will continue to be direct consequences of rapid population growth in the county. All are likely to adversely affect water quality and the ecological and amenity value of water bodies.

River corridors and the section of Grand Canal in the northeast of the county could come under increased pressure from recreational activities, as tourism in County Laois is further promoted. Rivers and lakes are an integral part of the visitor experience and should be developed sensitively to avoid adverse impacts resulting from heavy use.

Other visitor attractions and facilities could also be adversely affected if proper management

structures are not developed. The development of river corridors for activities such as fishing, boating, picnicking and walking could all potentially contribute to such impacts as erosion of riverbanks, water pollution, disturbance to wildlife and designated habitats, and loss of visual amenity.

#### **4.5 Agriculture**

A general decline in the sustainability of agriculture, particularly small-scale farms and farming on land at the edge of expanding settlements and the associated decline in management of farmland.

This has caused hedgerows to become overgrown, traditional dry stonewalls and banks to fall into disrepair and rushes to infest extensive grazing land. The decline in management of boundaries has also caused the loss of hedgerows and trees as they become over mature.

Where small farms are becoming less viable they are often being amalgamated into larger ones. The associated enlargement of fields and the removal of traditional boundary features, such as hedgerows, trees, walls and earth banks, is having an adverse impact on the appearance of the landscape and on its biodiversity. Strong hedgerows create a network of green corridors that provide habitats and allow wildlife to travel through the landscape easily.

#### **4.6 Tree Cover**

Laois is a relatively well-forested county. It has the third highest tree cover in the country. Many of the trees date back to the Plantation periods when demesne landscapes were planted with broadleaved species along entrance avenues with estate parkland and areas of mixed woodland often used for hunting for example at Ballyfin and Emo Court.

Most hedgerows are also well treed but less intensive management has caused the loss of

some and others have become over mature (see Agriculture section above).

There are several areas of extensive commercial forestry plantations [primarily of a coniferous type] in the county. Prime example are the Sliabh Bloom Mountains, Cullenagh Mountain and the upland areas in the south-east of the county. Coniferous plantations are significant and long-term landscape features which should be located sensitively. If located in prominent or highly visible locations they will change the traditional farmed appearance of the landscape and attract attention from long distances. They have the potential to adversely affect scenic value, views and prospects, biodiversity, flora and fauna and archaeological features.

In some places deforestation has occurred. This has allowed heathland and pioneer species such as birch to regenerate. This is also changing the appearance of the landscape - from an intensively managed, man-made landscape to a more natural and rougher textured landscape. It has also increased biodiversity.

There are no Tree Preservation Orders in County Laois.

#### **4.7 Capacity to Accommodate Change**

The forms of development most likely to occur in Co. Laois are identified based on an assessment of the current and planned landscape trends described above.

The potential capacity of each LCA to accommodate these types of development is assessed in greater detail further on. The likely characteristics of each form of development is described below including the features that are likely to cause adverse impacts on landscape character.

#### **4.8 Likely forms of Development**

<i>Large modern farm buildings</i>	Likely to be constructed using modern materials and colours. Massing and location are particularly likely to detract from visual quality.
<i>Industrial and commercial facilities</i>	May comprise low key or more prominent elements. Likely to include factories, warehouses, retail parks, hotels, and associated parking areas and signage. Potential impacts on landscape character may be caused by the creation of pollution, litter, visual clutter, inappropriate location within the landscape, materials, design and layout.
<i>Multi-house residential developments</i>	Are likely to be constructed using modern building materials, styles, scales and layouts. They may be large or small in size and are most likely to be located in and around existing settlements or primary transport routes. The current trend in housing development around urban fringes is adversely affecting the viability of adjacent farmland
<i>One off houses</i>	Built both at the edge of existing settlements and in open countryside, generally by owner-occupiers. These dwellings are likely to vary in scale, design and layout but will generally be of a substantial size i.e. greater than 250 sq. metres. Their impact on landscape character will be determined by their design, materials, scale, location, treatment of garden space and boundaries and cumulative impact if, as is often the case, many such houses are built in of proximity to each other.
<i>Conversion of existing buildings</i>	Provides opportunities to allow development in rural areas whilst conserving landscape character. Many conversions are likely to be residential but other uses should also be considered, particularly where opportunities for better management may enhance existing landscape condition and value. The nature of the proposed use, and its suitability for the

	<p>location should be considered as well as the method of restoration, which should respect historic materials and styles.</p>		
<p><i>Overhead cables, substations and communications masts</i></p>	<p>Are generally large and prominent features. Their impact on landscape character is a factor of their visual prominence, size and scale as well as their location in sensitive landscapes such as archaeological sites or areas within scenic vistas. The convergence of a number of overhead cables or the massing of a large substation or number of masts will adversely affect landscape character depending on the state of the landscape in question.</p>		<p>counties such as Tipperary where a large Energy Zone at Lisheen near Rathdowney has been opened. Physical impacts on sensitive landscape features such as habitats, historic artefacts and vegetation will also need to be considered and mitigated against.</p>
<p><i>Transport corridors,</i></p>	<p>Primarily roads and railways which may be improved or created eg the M7 and M8, future N80 road improvement projects.</p> <p>The most likely impacts of this type of development are noise and visual intrusion which are often exacerbated by the loss of existing boundary hedgerows, walls and mature trees. Other potential impacts on archaeology and drainage are also likely.</p>		<p><b>Solar farms-</b> Key impacts on landscape character will include visual impact on long and short-range views, sensitive historic landscapes and cumulative impacts of other developments. Solar farms are land in tense and result is significant site areas and coverage. The maintenance and enhancement of existing boundaries is required to mitigate visual impacts. Upland areas should be avoided in order to avoid visual impact.</p>
<p><i>Installation of new underground services</i></p>	<p>For example gas and water pipes resulting in potential loss of existing hedgerows, walls and trees and disturbance of archaeological features, habitats and drainage systems.</p>	<p><i>Biomass and forestry</i></p>	<p>Likely to comprise areas of single-species plantations which will be a long-term feature of the landscape. Evergreen conifer plantations exist in many parts of County Laois already but there are currently no biomass plantations, which are more likely to be fast growing deciduous species such as willow. Potential impacts of new plantations include loss of biodiversity and visual intrusion. Location away from visually prominent areas will be very important.</p>
<p><i>Wind turbines, installed as single turbines or wind farms.</i></p>	<p>Increasing renewable energy provision is a key element of central and regional government policy and is also emphasised in the Laois County Development Plan, 2021-2027.</p> <p>Key impacts on landscape character will include visual impact on long and short-range views, sensitive historic landscapes and cumulative impacts of other wind farms, including those in neighbouring</p>		<p>Such areas may provide opportunities for recreation and agricultural diversification, particularly where conventional farming is in decline.</p>
		<p><i>Quarries</i></p>	<p>Includes working areas, stockpiles, storage and parking areas, haul routes, plant, machinery and</p>

signage. Key impacts on landscape character will include visual intrusion, noise and dust pollution, run-off, erosion of habitats, reduced biodiversity, loss of flora and fauna, land rehabilitation and conversion to other uses including agriculture, amenity and afforestation.

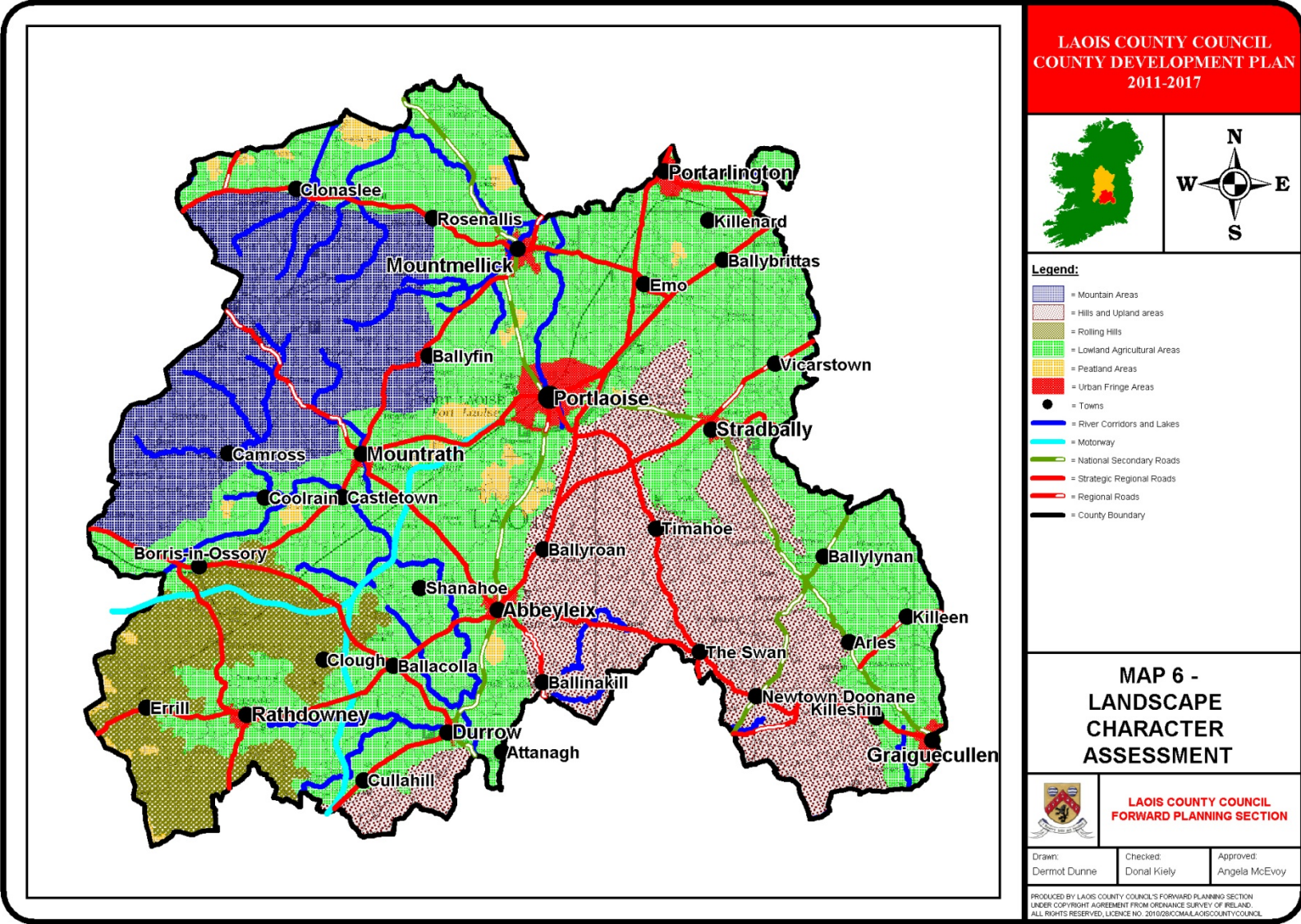
## **5. LANDSCAPE CHARACTER TYPES IN COUNTY LAOIS**

Landscape Character Types are distinct types of landscape that are relatively homogenous in character. They are generic in nature in that they may occur in different localities throughout any defined area. Nonetheless, where they do occur, they commonly share similar combinations of geology, topography, land cover and historical landuse. For example, blanket bog uplands are distinct landscape character types and are recognisable as such whether they occur in County Laois or other counties.

Co. Laois has been divided into 6 LCT's:

- Mountains, Hills and Upland Areas
- Lowland Agricultural Areas
- River Corridors and Lakes
- Peatland Areas
- Urban Fringe Areas
- Rolling Hill Areas





**TYPE 1: MOUNTAIN, HILLS AND UPLAND AREAS**



Although lacking in terms of dramatic peaks, hills and uplands are a prominent feature of the county, particularly in the north west and south-east. From the tops of these hills panoramic views of the lowland landscapes of Laois and adjacent counties are gained. The hills also act as orientating features. The Seven Hills, Cullenagh, Cullahill, Fossy Mountains and the upland areas around Swan, Luggacurren and Wolfhill are prominent by virtue of landmarks at their summits as well as their topography: for example a church on the Wolfhill acts as a prominent local landmark.

The hills and uplands form important historic features with an abundance of archaeological features and contain evidence of human settlement extending back 9,000 years.

There is extensive mono-type afforestation and marginal agriculture in these areas. Field systems and the enclosures associated with them are generally absent in this landscape. New dwellings are comparatively few with much of the older stock abandoned and derelict.

These hills and uplands represent some potential in terms of tourism development. However, at present they are somewhat isolated as separate entities. Linking the most important sites by way-marked trails would be a

valuable addition allowing further appreciation of the landscape in a sensitive manner.

The Sliabh Bloom Mountains are the only mountain range in the county, covering an area of approx. 25,000 hectares with the remaining 12,000 hectares in County Offaly.

In addition to the multiple nature designations including extensive NHA's, SAC's, and SPA, tourist infrastructure in the form of picnic areas, mountain bike trail, walking trails, archaeological artifacts, the mountains offer a sense of remoteness and a range of spectacular views over the rest of County Laois and many adjoining counties. They also contain the largest unbroken area of upland blanket peat in Ireland.

As a result, the Sliabh Blooms are particularly sensitive to many forms of development including large agricultural structures, sporadic housing, transmission lines, masts and windfarm developments. There is increasing concern about the visual impact of widespread coniferous tree plantations on the mountains as well.

If allowed at all, new housing should be very low impact in design, scale, mass and site selection. Robust, well screened sites should be chosen over unscreened elevated sites in order to restrict the visual impact to as small an area as possible.

**Policy Objectives for Hills and Uplands Areas and Mountain Areas**

<b>LCA 5</b>	Ensure that development will not have a disproportionate visual impact (due to excessive bulk, scale or inappropriate siting) and will not significantly interfere with or detract from scenic upland vistas, when viewed from areas
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	nearby, scenic routes, viewpoints and settlements
<b>LCA 6</b>	Ensure that developments on steep slopes (i.e. >10%) will not be conspicuous or have a disproportionate visual impact on the surrounding environment as seen from relevant scenic routes, viewpoints and settlements
<b>LCA 7</b>	Facilitate, where appropriate, developments that have a functional and locational requirement to be situated on steep or elevated sites (e.g. reservoirs, telecommunication masts or wind energy structures) where residual adverse visual impacts are minimised or mitigated
<b>LCA 8</b>	Maintain the visual integrity of areas which have retained a largely undisturbed upland character and Respect the remote character and existing low-density development in these areas.
<b>LCA 9</b>	Have regard to the potential for screening vegetation when evaluating proposals for development within the uplands
<b>LCA 10</b>	Actively propose the designation of the Slieve Blooms as a Special Amenity Area and seek an Order to that effect.
<b>LCA 11</b>	Protect the positive contribution that views across adjacent lowland areas and landmarks within the landscape make to the overall landscape character

## TYPE 2: LOWLAND AGRICULTURAL AREAS



The Lowland LCT covers the largest proportion of County Laois. In terms of landuse, it is comprised primarily of pastoral and tillage agriculture.

It is generally a flat open landscape [around Ballylynan, Barrowhouse and the environs of Graiguecullen especially] with long range views towards the upland areas. Field patterns tend to be of large scale and are generally bounded by deciduous hedgerows containing mature trees. Farm sizes are larger than average. Throughout the county there is an abundance of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century demesnes with extensive areas of mixed woodland and parkland bounded by original stonewalls, creating an attractive landscape setting for the numerous estate houses.

The Lowland LCT has been developed more extensively than other the LCT's, particularly in the north and east where there is development pressure from the large towns as well as the Dublin metropolitan area. This has resulted in significant changes to the landscape character and it is crucial that future development of this LCT is carried out sensitively and with particular reference to the rural nature of the landscape.

The significant growth of towns and villages over the past decade has led to myriad of architectural styles that are not in keeping with the historic built vernacular. It is equally

important that future development relates to the existing structure of towns and villages and reflects characteristic building scales and materials.

Much of the lowlands have an enclosed character with well-treed road corridors, dense hedgerows, parkland and areas of woodland. Views of landmarks within the landscape and of the surrounding upland areas are a characteristic of this area and must be retained because the interaction between the lowlands and hills/uplands is an important feature of this LCT.

**TYPE 3: RIVER CORRIDORS AND LAKES**



<b>Policy Objectives for Lowland Agricultural Areas</b>	
<b>LCA 13</b>	Recognise that this lowland landscape character area includes areas of significant landscape and ecological value, which are worthy of protection, particularly the 18th and 19 <sup>th</sup> century estate landscapes and associated parkland & woodland to develop them as a tourism resource.
<b>LCA 14</b>	Continue to permit development that can utilise existing structures, settlement areas and infrastructure, whilst taking account of the visual absorption opportunities provided by existing topography and vegetation
<b>LCA 15</b>	Recognise that the lowlands are made up of a variety of working landscapes, which are critical resources for sustaining the economic and social wellbeing of the county
<b>LCA 16</b>	Promote good agricultural practices to create a sustainable rural economy AND SUPPORT incentives for smaller rural/family farms to manage their land to avoid loss of hedgerows and field patterns.

A number of key river corridors traverse County Laois. This LCT contains a wealth of historic features providing longstanding evidence of human influence on the landscape including Norman fortifications, castles, demesnes and industrial artifacts such as mills, canals and bridges.

The River Nore is the largest and most prominent of the river corridors. The river enters the county north of Borris-in Ossory and runs generally in a southeast trajectory through Castletown, west of Abbeyleix, east of Durrow and onto Ballyragget, County Kilkenny. It merges with a number of other rivers along the way including Whitehorse [near Mountrath] and Erkina, Gully and Owenbeg [near Durrow]. The river is enclosed and well wooded along much of its length, containing areas of mixed deciduous woodland of great antiquity and species diversity including specimen oak in Abbeyleix Demesne.

Excellent views of the river are afforded at a number of locations including Castletown, Shanahoe and near Attanagh where the river can be seen cutting through large flat-bottomed valleys.

The River Nore has a number of key designations including extensive SAC/SPA and more partial NHA coverage. It is an

internationally renowned site for the freshwater pearl mussel.

**Grand Canal at Vicarstown**



The River Barrow is an extensive river corridor in the north and east of the County where it forms a significant portion of the county boundary with Kildare. It flows eastwards through Portarlinton onto Monasterevan, re-enters the county east of Ballybrittas and merges with the Stradbally River northeast of Stradbally. Within County Laois, the river has a European designation as an SAC; however only a minor portion near Maganey is designated as an NHA. Key vistas of the Barrow River are available in Portarlinton and Graiguecullen.

Though less extensive than the Rivers Nore and Barrow which carry both national and regional significance, the county contains a number of locally important river corridors such as the Erkina and Goul which flow between Cullahill and Durrow where they join with the River Nore, the Owenass on which Mountmellick is built and which joins with the River Barrow near Portarlinton, the Fushoge between Arles and Carlow, the Delour in Coolrain and the Clodiagh in Clonaslee. With the exception of the River Owenass and to a lesser extent the River Clodiagh, the others have remained relatively undisturbed with largely undeveloped corridors, and a diverse range of habitats of high ecological value and significant areas of SAC and NHA designation.

A portion of the Grand Canal-Barrow Way enters into the northeastern part of the county Laois and follows in a southerly route from Jamestown onto Vicarstown.

Primarily a product of 19th Century industry and commerce, it now acts as a major tourist resource providing a range of recreation opportunities including walking, cycling, water sports and fishing. The canal has NHA designation and it is located in very close proximity to the SAC designated River Barrow.

In addition to the rivers and canal, there are a number of lakes located throughout County Laois. The most significant of these including Ballyfin, Emo, Heywood, Grantstown, Masslough and Rathdaire are of man-made origin and were developed as ornamental features of formerly extensive 19<sup>th</sup> Century country house demesnes. The lakes which are now mainly used for recreational and amenity purposes, provide aquatic habitats of high ecological value supporting a diverse range of animal and plant life. A number of the lakes for example Grantstown are designated.

<b>Policy Objectives for River Corridors and Lakes Areas</b>	
<b>LCA 16</b>	Recognise the importance of river corridors for scenic value, ecology, history, culture and for recreational purposes such as walking, cycling and various on-water activities;
<b>LCA 17</b>	Maintain the rivers throughout the county whilst ensuring that all works are carried out subject to appropriate environmental assessment in accordance with Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, in respect of any proposed development likely to have an impact on a designated natural heritage site, site proposed to be designated and

	any additional sites that may be designated during the period of this Plan
<b>LCA 18</b>	Preserve riverside historic features and their landscape settings and Conserve valuable habitats focused on and around river corridors and estuaries including European and national designations
<b>LCA 19</b>	Recognise the potential constraints on development created by river flood plains and the value of these flood plains as increasingly rare habitats
<b>LCA 20</b>	Avoid unsustainable exploitation of watercourses, e.g. for abstraction and dilution of effluent, to the point that these water courses lose their ecological and amenity value
<b>LCA 21</b>	Collaborate with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Waterways Ireland and other relevant stakeholders to facilitate public access to waterway corridors and maintain and enhance the natural character of rivers, lakes and canals by reserving land to facilitate walking, cycling and other non-noise generating recreational activities
<b>LCA 22</b>	Explore the establishment of the Barrow/Nore Valley and the Grand Canal as Areas of Special Amenity, as per section 202 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended)

#### TYPE 4: PEATLAND AREAS



Topography is strikingly flat, geology is generally Carboniferous Limestone (type varies according to specific location) and landcover is raised bog much of which is now exhausted and being considered for alternatives uses including afforestation, amenity and wind energy.

The Lisheen site in County Tipperary [south of Rathdowney] clearly shows the potential of using disused cutaway bogland for developing wind energy.

This landscape type could be more accurately described as a specific habitat rather than a landscape type per se. In its original state, the undisturbed raised bog is peat based and supports a dense growth of birch scrub with gorse and heather as an understorey. Manual turf cutting in some areas will have left a somewhat untidy exposed peat surface, with scarce vegetation. Commercially harvested peatland areas are generally devoid of vegetation and present as an evenly exposed surface of peat. Such a man made landscape has a sterile and indeed industrial character. Pockets of rough grazing and scrubland also exist in this landscape character area.

In terms of location, some of the larger peatland areas are in close proximity to the larger urban settlements such as Cul na Mona between Portlaoise and Mountrath. Others are in more remote, sparsely populated place, for example in the southwest of the county.

<b>Policy Objectives for <i>Peatland Areas</i></b>	
<b>LCA 23</b>	Recognise the importance of peatlands for ecology, history, culture and for alternative energy production
<b>LCA 24</b>	Conserve valuable habitats including any European and national designations
<b>LCA 25</b>	Support the identification of projects that have the potential to achieve commercial value such as industrial developments, renewable energy, tourism developments etc. while at the same time promoting high environmental standards and supporting Biodiversity objectives
<b>LCA 26</b>	Support the restoration of peatlands on suitable sites
<b>LCA 27</b>	Recognise that intact boglands are critical natural resources for ecological and environmental reasons and recognise that cutaway and cut-over boglands represent degraded landscapes and/or brownfield sites and thus are potentially robust to absorb a variety of appropriate developments

**TYPE 5: URBAN FRINGE AREAS**



Elevations range from 20-100 metres and geology is generally Carboniferous Limestone. The majority of the centres of the county population are located in this landscape type including the largest urban settlements of Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Mountmellick and Graiguecullen. This landscape type also overlaps with LCT’s 2 [Lowland Agricultural Areas] 3 [River Corridors and Lakes] and 5 [Peatland Areas].

In terms of urban fringe, the defining characteristics include the radiating road routes on which development has taken place in a ribbon-type physical form. Individual sites are often suburban in design and their more formal and sculptured character does not usually integrate sympathetically with the overall landscape context.

Another characteristic of this LCT is the frequently disused or underused nature of former agricultural lands which are now zoned and set aside for future development or may be required for orbital route schemes.

<b>Policy Objectives for <i>Urban Fringe Areas</i></b>	
<b>LCA 28</b>	Diversify the urban fringe by developing mixed-use amenity areas, which will create a landscape buffer creating a transition between urban and

	rural areas
<b>LCA 29</b>	Define the urban fringe with planting of native species and mixed woodland to tie into existing rural landscape

**TYPE 6: ROLLING HILL AREAS**



Undulating with variable topography usually ranging from 70 metres to 90 metres. Geology comprises Silurian greywackes and slates with Old Red Sandstone at lower elevations.

Overall, this is a complex landscape incorporating several elements within a rolling landform. Land cover reflects this complexity with tillage and pasture agriculture, pockets of wetlands and raised bog, small coniferous plantations and occasional deciduous copses. Varied enclosures include hedgerows with significant amounts of trees and some post and wire fencing. Settlement is quite frequent though commonly dispersed. Considerable evidence of new one-off house building in the vicinity of settlements

<b>Policy Objectives for <i>Rolling Hill Areas</i></b>	
<b>LCA 30</b>	Maintain the visual integrity of rolling hill areas which have retained an upland character
<b>LCA 31</b>	Continue to facilitate appropriate development, in an incremental and clustered manner, where feasible, that respects the scale, character and sensitivities of the local landscape, recognising the need for sustainable settlement patterns and economic activity within the county
<b>LCA 32</b>	Continue to permit development that can utilise existing infrastructure, whilst taking account of local absorption opportunities provided by the landscape, landform and prevailing vegetation



