

2019

Submission to the Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

Submission on behalf of Laois County Council,
Aras an Chontae, JFL Avenue, Portlaoise, Co Laois



Laois County Council
1/22/2019



Introduction

Laois County Council welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the first Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the region as defined for EMRA. We support the vision and acknowledge that the creation of a sustainable competitive region is to the betterment of the citizens of County Laois.

We acknowledge that it is a fast growing region but insist that it is imperative that Jobs must follow the growth that has happened to date and so we must plan for economic opportunity in our County. Portlaoise was one of the towns which has achieved substantial population growth and infrastructural investment during the time period of the last Regional Planning Guidelines. It is evident that people chose County Laois and Portlaoise as a place to live due to its proximity to Dublin, affordability and the quality of the amenities on offer. The County Laois Socio Economic Profile is such that it reflects largely the socio economic picture of the region.

LAOIS IN CONTEXT

The 2016 Census of Population confirmed Laois County and its two main towns, Portlaoise and Portarlington are rapidly growing towns. Between 2011 and 2016, the most recent inter censal period the population of Laois increased by 5% (4,138 persons). The national average for the same period was 3.8%, therefore Laois is one of the fastest growing counties in the country along with Fingal, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, Meath and Cork City.

Undoubtedly the majority of the population of Laois is of Irish nationality 89% (74,626 persons) a further 6% (4,684 persons) is of Polish and Other EU28 nationality.

The population of Laois County is relatively young, 31% (26,140) is aged between 0-19 in which 26% (6,823 persons) live within the identified settlement boundary of Portlaoise. Therefore it is not surprising the 2016 Census confirmed the age profile of the County is the fifth lowest in the country whilst Portlaoise is **Ireland's fifth youngest town** in Ireland with the average age of the population being 33.2. This is in contrast to Balbriggan which was classified the youngest town in Ireland with an average age population of 30.8. The population of Laois is aging, 16% (13,571 persons) of the total population is aged between 60 to 85+ years.

Laois experienced significant growth in the last inter censal period however it is anticipated the County will experience a similar growth surge in the future. Of the total families in Laois County 18% is classified as been pre-family and/or empty nest.

The housing stock of Laois County, Portlaoise and Portarlington coincides with the population increase and age profile of the inhabitants of Laois. There is a total of 28,997 household units with Laois County; 86% is privately owned whilst 10% is rented from the local authority or a voluntary/co-operative housing body. According to the 2016 Census 37% (10,702) of the housing stock was erected between 2001-2010, 31% of these units were built in Portlaoise whilst 15% were built in Portarlington.

Given the strategic location of Laois and the influence of the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) it is not surprising **11,477 individuals commute outside of the county for employment** each day. The relative proximity to the capital has had a major effect on both the nature and extent of development and the associated traffic movements, particularly in the northern and eastern parts

of the County. The travel time between Laois and Dublin continues to decrease due to the improved rail and road infrastructure between these two locations.

Of those working and living in Portlaoise, Portarlington and the overall County, the majority are employed in the commerce and trade sector, accounting for 22% (7,307 persons) of the workforce. The level of education attained by the people of Laois is reflective of the age profile of the area and deprivation index however the number of those attaining third level education has increased somewhat over the previous years. In 2017 alone 2,453 individuals residing in Laois enrolled in third level institutions.

The overall health and well-being of the people of Laois is satisfactory, 60% of the total population considered their general health to be very good whilst only 1% rated their health to be bad.

Taking into account the profile and needs to be addressed as described for our County above, Laois County Council acknowledge that the Regional Strategic Outcomes as drafted are important in improving Placemaking and Quality of life in all towns and villages. This has been supported by the grant funding received by the numerous state agencies to better these factors, namely –

1. Urban Regeneration Development Fund

- Laois County Council - Portlaoise - A Cultural Quarter Laois EMRA IUD / PR / CHR / CD / LD - €2,343,000.00 for 2019 – a 3 year programme
- Laois County Council, Portlaoise - A Low Carbon Town- Laois EMRA ED / PR - €1,014,000.00 for 2019 – a 2 year programme

2. Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

OPW - for Emo Court, Emo, Emo Court - Office of Public Works- €1,200,000

This project will deliver a major upgrade of the Emo Court Estate, which will celebrate 25 years in public ownership in 2019. This Gandon-designed house was the seat of the Earls of Portarlington. The development will include the opening of the first floor to the public, which will provide a “walk-in-the-shoes” experience documenting the house’s 20th century history. There will also be an event and exhibition space, enhancements to the grounds, and the basement will house a recreation of an 18th century kitchen. The objective is to create a “must-see” tourist attraction for the region which will benefit the nearby rural community.

3. Town and Village Renewal

870,094 has been allocated to Laois under the Government’s Town and Village Renewal Scheme, with an additional €284,032 going to projects under the Community Enhancement Programme scheme. The following projects will receive funds under the Town and Village scheme 2018:

- Borris in Ossory Development of a new town park/ public amenity and looped walkway – €40,000
- Camross Village Hub – €55,649
- Clonaslee Upgrade the Community Centre €85,245

- Durrow – Conversion of existing buildings to community centre €200,000
- Errill – Build sensory and biodiversity rich garden in village centre €20,000
- Mountmellick – Enhancements to Community Art Centre €98,000
- Mountrath – Renovation of part of former convent school for community €100,000
- Portarlinton – Enhancement, increased accessibility and security in Portarlinton People’s Park €100,000
- Rathdowney – Village enhancements €40,000
- Timahoe – Village Enhancements €76,000

CHAPTER 2 : STRATEGIC VISION

Laois County Council support the strategic vision and the regional strategic outcomes aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This submission is framed in a such a way as to ensure that those goals can be specifically achieved for Co Laois up to 2040.

The RSO’s identified on Page 22 of the Draft Document when considered relative to County Laois and Portlaoise in particular need to be strengthened under the following headings :-

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

This is a particular challenge for County Laois to date and the county Town of Portlaoise in Particular. There has been investment by Local Authority in acquiring lands for economic purposes at the Togher Interchange , now referred to as the J17 National Enterprise Park, a masterplan has been done for these lands and adopted by the Local authority which gives a strategic vision for the employment opportunity within the county town. We feel this needs to augmented in the RSO’s in the final document as follows:-

- *Support the vision and objectives of the J17 National Enterprise Park Masterplan which aims to deliver a viable economic zone within Portlaoise which will accommodate a range of potential businesses and industries whilst having regard to spatial planning, infrastructural, environmental and transportation requirements and compatibility with adjoining land uses;*

HEALTHY PLACEMAKING

Both the urban and rural communities need to be acknowledged in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy(RSES). There is a very weighty emphasis on growing Dublin and the MASP area and correctly so, however given the population living in the identified key towns and supporting rural hinterlands, it is essential that there is more of a emphasis put on rural communities sustaining the region.

CLIMATE ACTION

It is acknowledged that climate action has been threaded through the RSO's of the document, particularly in relation to enhanced green infrastructure and blue way development and supporting the transition to low carbon and clean energy. We acknowledge RPO 4.48 as follows :-

RPO 4.48: Support transition of Portlaoise to a low carbon town centre by reducing car use and promoting walking and cycling and improving the mix of uses within the town centre.

This RPO has been funded under the Urban Regeneration Development Fund (URDF) 2018 until 2021 and many projects have been identified as follows to Portlaoise

Triogue River Blueway
Cycle routes to be completed within Portlaoise Town
Town Bus to provide connections to residential areas
Bus Station Canopy at James Fintan Lalor Avenue
Solar Compactor Bin
e-Car Charging Points
Low-E lighting
Park and Stride at Summerhill

We would suggest that further RPO's need to be included as follows :

- *To seek investment in sustainable transport including provision of a Town Bus Service which are minimum Hybrid with an aim to be fully electric by 2030;*

CHAPTER 3 - GROWTH STRATEGY / CHAPTER 4 - PEOPLE AND PLACE

The growth strategy envisaged based on an asset based approach has identified both Portlaoise and Graiguecullen within the county. We welcome this however to support the future development of both towns, additional RPO's are required on page 59 of the Draft document as follows :-

PORTLAOISE

- *Key towns shall act as economic drivers and provide for strategic employment locations to improve their economic base by increasing the ration of jobs to workers;*
- *Support the vision and objectives of the J17 National Enterprise Park Masterplan which aims to deliver a viable economic zone within Portlaoise which will accommodate a range of potential businesses and industries whilst having regard to spatial planning, infrastructural, environmental and transportation requirements and compatibility with adjoining land uses;*
- *Support the development and expansion of the Midlands Regional Hospital to be a centre of excellence for Portlaoise and its catchment area;*

- *To seek investment in sustainable transport including provision of a Town Bus Service which are minimum Hybrid with an aim to be fully electric by 2030;;*
- *to support the delivery of the infrastructural requirements identified for Portlaoise subject to the outcome of the planning process and environmental assessments.*

GRAIGUECULLEN

The importance of Graiguecullen / Carlow as an inter regional town needs to be considered within the Eastern and Midlands Draft RSES. Both Laois and Carlow Local Authorities have worked together in the past for the benefit of the citizens and will continue to do so going forward.

We suggest rewording the RPO 4.49 as follows

A cross boundary joint urban area plan (UAP) shall be prepared for Carlow County Council and Laois County Council having regard to its location within the combined functional areas of both local authorities.

The joint UAP shall provide a coordinated planning framework to identify and deliver strategic sites and regeneration areas for the future physical, economic and social development of Carlow / Graiguecullen to ensure it achieves targeted compact growth of a minimum of 30% and ensure a coordinated approach is taken to the future growth and development of the combined urban area to ensure that it has the capacity to grow sustainably and secure investment as a regional growth centre.

The Joint UAP shall identify a boundary for the plan area and strategic housing and employment development areas and infrastructure investment requirements to promote greater coordination and sequential delivery of serviced lands for development. Regard shall be had to the respective housing, retail and other Local Authority strategies that may be in place.

We suggest the following additional RPO's

- *Key towns shall act as economic drivers and provide for strategic employment locations to improve their economic base by increasing the ration of jobs to workers;*
- *To seek investment in sustainable transport including provision of a Town Bus Service;*
- *To support delivery of the Southern Relief Road N80 – R448 and other transport measures through a Local Transport Plan;*
- *To support development of underused lands along the River Barrow. Any future development of underused lands along the River Barrow will include an assessment of any impacts that may arise on sensitive Natura 2000 habitats;*

The area that needs greatest attention is that in relation to *Section 4.7 Other Towns*” and *“Section 4.8 Rural Areas”* .

In a region as diverse as the EMRA region, those towns and villages within the rural counties may seem like they will play a minor role in relation to the strategic vision of providing a “competitive and sustainable region”, however their importance should not be underestimated, they are the back bone of the rural counties on the periphery of the region but add to the placemaking of each individual county and contribute to the success of each county in terms of providing :-

ECONOMIC VIABILITY - One of the best practice examples of communities doing it for themselves is the Mountmellick Development Association (MDA) who has secured funding to develop “Mountmellick Webmill”. This will create a space for entrepreneurs, startups, growth companies, educational institutions, state agencies and local government. The goal is to create an innovation ecosystem, one that creates a synergistic relationship between people, companies, and place, that facilitates idea generation, open learning, collaboration and accelerates commercialisation.

Mountmellick Webmill allows entrepreneurs to use collaborative spaces, coworking spaces, mingle with other entrepreneurs and have efficient access to everything from insights into the latest technology to legal and financial advice. Rather than endure long commutes and daily congestion, residents of the Digital Hub can choose to work and live in places that are connected, walkable, bike-able and connected by technology.

The Webmill was set up to address a number of needs in Laois. A recurring theme was the lack of a downtown innovation hub for incoming and indigenous startups - with all the expected features: red brick walls, wooden beams, fibre internet, and of course, coffee. Along with Laois County Council, we took the first step in making what we have called the Webmill a reality. In March 2018, renovation started on the Mountmellick Business Park with the Mountmellick Development Association, and soon in 2018, the Webmill will open the doors officially to startup companies.

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES - One Example of how this is done best within the County is evidenced in the National Pride of Place Competition for 2018 where an Activity & Wellness HUB for the towns and rural hinterlands of Stradbally Vicarstown Timahoe was showcased – this is a vibrant, energetic, inclusive hub in its second year, that links 3 communities in a rural parish in Co. Laois. The HUB promotes all physical activities in the Stradbally, Vicarstown and Timahoe areas while also ensuring the health & wellbeing and social needs of the communities are reflected.

COLLABORATION – local communities – working with stakeholders and sporting organisations for the betterment of their communities and future generations. Best practice examples of this are evident in many smaller towns and villages across the region.

CREATIVE PLACES - Many of the communities in the medium and small towns in County Laois have actively become involved in becoming “Creative Places”, showcasing talents and building on the natural assets in a positive and sustainable way e.g. **Stradbally** – the development of the Arts House which fosters creativity, the development of **Abbeyleix Bog** in **Abbeyleix** which

promotes a natural area for walking, photography enthusiasts, nature and wildlife hobbyists and families who love the outdoors.

There are no RPO's for the Other Towns Section which is most disappointing as the good work that is done by the local authority and communities needs to be supported by policy provision at the regional level. We suggest the following general RPO's which could apply to all medium to small towns within the region and would acknowledge their contribution to developing the strategic vision for the region:-

SECTION 4.7 OTHER TOWNS - SUGGESTED REGIONAL POLICY OBJECTIVES

- *Support the consolidation of the town and village network to ensure that development proceeds sustainably and at an appropriate scale, level and pace in line with the Core Strategies of the County Development Plans;*
- *Seek investment in the sustainable development of a "New Homes in Small Towns and Villages" initiative which would augment the delivery of actions by Local Authorities, Irish Water, communities and other stakeholders in the provision of services and serviced sites to create "build your own home" opportunities within the existing footprint of rural settlements*
- *Support communities in collaboration with relevant agencies and departments to address any socio economic needs that may arise during the plan period;*
- *Support strengthening the viability of our towns and rural settlements as a key objective of the RSES Including the protection of essential rural services such as Post Offices, shops, medical facilities and fuel outlets;*
- *Support the rural economy and initiatives in relation to diversification, rural tourism and renewable energy so as to sustain the employment opportunities in rural areas;*
- *Support co-ordination between Local Authorities, Irish Water and other stakeholders to deliver investment in the sustainable development of water and waste-water and other infrastructure for towns and villages, prioritising retrofitting and improvement in the quality of existing services.*

RURAL DEVELOPMENT

As per the submission made by the Elected members of Laois County Council, we request that the rural housing policy ***in relation to the provision of rural housing is protected, which we believe adequately facilitates those that have a genuine reason to live in the countryside subject to proper planning and sustainable development and environmental protection standards.***

The following is the Policy of the LAOIS County Development Plan 2017-2023 which we would

It is an objective to recognise the individual housing needs of people intrinsic to the rural areas located within the areas defined as 'rural areas under strong urban influence' and 'Strong Rural Areas' . Such needs may be accommodated on lands within the rural area under strong urban influence, subject to the availability of a suitable site and normal proper planning and sustainable development criteria.

It is an objective of the Council **only** to permit single houses in the area under strong urban influence and Strong Rural Area to facilitate those with a local rural housing need in the area, in particular those that have lived in an rural area.

In order to demonstrate a genuine rural housing need, any of the following criteria **shall** be met:

- a) the application is being made by a long term landowner or his/her son or daughter seeking to build their **first** home on the family lands; or
- b) the applicant is engaged in working the family farm and the house is for that persons own use; or
- c) the applicant is working in rural activities' and for this reason needs to be accommodated near their place of work; or
- d) the application is being made by a local rural person(s) who have spent a substantial period of their life living in the local rural area, and, who for family and/or work reasons need to live in the rural area.

Please take this into account as part of the new EMRA Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

CHAPTER 6 ECONOMY AND EMPLOYMENT

Laois County Council wishes to make the following observation and submission on this chapter.

Firstly it is noted the 320,000 jobs are the target for delivery under the NPF in relation to the EMRA region. There is no defined spatial distribution evident in this draft document. An estimated figure of 10,000 for Laois during the lifetime of the plan should be set as a target based on the population growth given to County Laois and also taking into account the 11000 commuters leaving the county on a daily basis for employment in the greater Dublin region or MASP area. In particular there should be Regional Policy Objectives for supporting reverse commuting in Chapter 6 under Section 6.4, particularly for all the towns in the Midlands Area which would

- *support the development of digital hubs, coworking spaces to allow for 2nd site locations*

It is noted that 9.4% of the local jobs within County Laois are credited to the agriculture and forestry industry (Figure 6.2), this is the highest % within the EMRA region for any one county and yet policy supporting this industry is non-existent under Section 6.5 where it is referred to. We acknowledge reference to the development of rural areas Section 6.4., however we request that agriculture and its associated industry is strongly acknowledged within the document particularly in Section 6.6. with the following objectives. Laois County Council in partnership with the relevant agencies such as Laois LEO, Laois Partnership, Carlow IT, etc continues to work very hard to build an economic environment conducive to local entrepreneurs through

- the promotion and development of the 'Connect2laois' brand
- the promotion of entrepreneurship across all sectors through the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and the Business Support Unit
- ongoing advice/support to start up/established businesses the LEO/Laois Partnership/EI/Carlow IT
- continued support/development of Community Enterprise Centres in Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Mountmellick;
- support of rural towns which have potential for economic development under the Rural Enterprise Development Zones (REDZ) initiative – Inspire Rathdonney, development of a Fab Lab in Portarlinton and Connect2Laois for Food Project.
- Ongoing collaboration with other stakeholders

The following RPO 's are suggested

- *Deliver sustainable actions under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 and beyond in priority areas of innovation, bio-diversity restoration, water and soil management, renewable energy and waste management, carbon conservation and sequestration, diversification, job creation and ICT development in our rural areas.*
- *Harness the potential of shared learning and good practice from European Rural Development Programmes and policy to assist rural development.*
- *Drive sustainable transboundary regional projects and initiatives in Rural Economic Development Zones (REDZ) in the EMRA Region and support investment in the sustainable development of infrastructure to enhance the economic and service functions of urban centres in REDZ areas.*

We note under the Tourism (section 6.5), the policy RPO 6.18 which relates to the identification of Destination towns for tourism development. We feel that this exercise has already been done in so far as a lot of the key towns have specific objectives relating to the development of Tourist Hubs.

The strategic focus on Ireland's Ancient East provides Laois with an international marketing opportunity through the uniqueness of the county's heritage and associated stories. The international marketing focus around Ireland's Ancient East provides the industry with a visitor

experience development focus that can provide immediate differentiation through the adoption of key story themes throughout the county, supported by the enhancement of the built heritage assets. The Ireland's Ancient East opportunity is aligned to all sectors within the tourism industry providing a platform for significant innovation and wider industry collaboration. The objectives of the *Tourism Strategy 2018* state as follows :-

Objectives:

1. Work with Failte Ireland to develop quality product and visitor experiences that will create a focal point for the development of the Laois tourism industry.
2. Develop a 'Gateway Town' story for key towns providing one core theme that acts as a stimulus for product, visitor experience and marketing development of towns and communities across Laois.
3. Prioritise the development of the Rock of Dunamaise through enhanced visitor facilities and site interpretation to become a leading visitor attraction within Ireland's Ancient East.
4. Build on the uniqueness of Laois' culture and heritage to develop new industry stories to support emerging sectors such as food to develop the national Gastro Pub destination harnessing the heritage of public houses across the country working with local food and drink suppliers.
5. Support the expansion of key events that are aligned with the stories of Laois and supporting the development of Ireland's Ancient East under the existing themes of Tales of Two Worlds, Castles & Conquests and Sacred Ireland.
6. Focus future capital investment into product development that enhances that product mix that contributes to the ambition of realising the potential of Ireland's Ancient East for Laois..

Portlaoise has not been identified in this manner and we would request that due consideration be given to including a regional policy objective in this regard , given the current state investment in developing a Cultural quarter around the Fort Protector under the URDF referenced earlier in this submission which would support the Local Authority vision to create a destination within Portlaoise for visitors to the County.

CHAPTER 7 -ENVIRONMENT

Laois County Council wishes to make the following observation and submission on this chapter.

The amenity value Co.Laois offers to the Midlands SPA and indeed the greater EMRA region should not go unnoticed. The unspoilt nature and huge potential to develop our natural amenity attractions such as the Slieve Blooms, Emo Court, Abbeyleix Bog which we have safeguarded successfully from inappropriate development must be considered as an area worthy of mention in the context of a network of spaces through the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) area.

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

In this regard to we acknowledge the Regional Policy Outcomes in Section 7.5 and Section 7.6 and request an additional objective as follows

- *Facilitate cross boundary co-ordination between local authorities and the relevant agencies of the region to provide clear governance arrangements and coordination mechanisms to continue to promote the development of improved visitor experiences and facilities in the Slieve Bloom Mountains.*

Table 7.1 should be amended to include “Abbeyleix Bog” under *Bogs and Peatlands*.

Two areas that should be mentioned in this chapter relate to the following as they are important in the context of protecting the biodiversity of the region in both urban and rural contexts :-

- 1) *Invasive species and*
- 2) *All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2015-2020*

The following policy objectives are suggested :-

- *support coordination between the region’s Local Authorities in terms of their measures to survey invasive species in their counties and coordinate regional responses.*
- *encourage greater awareness of potential threats caused by invasive species and how they can be spread.*
- *The management of invasive species where there is a corridor such as hydrological connections to European Sites shall be carefully considered and implemented in order to prevent the spread of invasive to sensitive sites.*
- *to support the implementation of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2015 – 2020. Local Authorities should incorporate the actions of All- Ireland Pollinator Plan 2015-2020 when managing their parks, open spaces, roadside verges and all vegetation in a way that provides more opportunities for biodiversity, while being cognisant of the threat of the spread of invasive species.*

CHAPTER 8 - CONNECTIVITY

Laois County Council wishes to make the following observation and submission on this chapter. We welcome the integration of transport and land use planning. Portlaoise is ideally located to achieve goals of this chapter – reverse commuting etc

LOCAL TRANSPORT PLANS (LTP’S)

The policy objective should include a reference to who prepares the plans and the state bodies which provide guidance for them. Also the LTP’s should include a reference to green energy infrastructure such as charging points for electric vehicles. The following as suggestions to policy:-

- RPO 8.5 - Local Authorities shall prepare Local Transport Plans for selected towns under with guidance from TII and NTA and all relevant stakeholders.
- LTPs shall include provision for infrastructure for electric vehicles.
- Table 8.2 - provision of an appropriate level of commuter rail service in the Midlands and south-East. Commuter rail services should include ancillary infrastructure such as car parking due to the location of train stations on restricted sites in town centres, e.g Portlaoise.
 - *High speed rail link extended to Portlaoise;*
 - *Optimisation of the existing rail network assets and the protection of these assets for our region's transition to greater levels of sustainable mobility, use of rail and achievement of lower carbon emissions;*
 - *Investment in upgrading and modernisation of fleet, rail infrastructure and passenger facilities;*
 - *Investment in commuter rail stations and services, especially in cities, suburbs and metropolitan areas;*
 - *Investment in park and ride and multi-modal transport interconnection facilities with rail networks;*

The policy in relation to the N80 should align with the policy objective in the Southern Regional Assembly's Draft RSES which is "To support delivery of the Southern Relief Road N80 – R448 and other transport measures through a Local Transport Plan;"

- *Upgrades to the N80 to include the Bypass of Mountmellick and Carlow NRR extension completion should be highlighted as important due to the inter/intra regional aspect.*

The Regional Policy Objectives for bus projects for the region should reference a move towards the use of hybrid/electrical vehicles. The following is suggested policy in this regard:-

- *To support the development of local bus routes and supporting infrastructure in conjunction with the NTA and other key stakeholders within Key Towns and rural towns. Hybrid or electrical buses should be encouraged on these routes where feasible.*

There should be cross reference between the Chapter on Connectivity and Chapter on the Environment in relation to Greenway Blueway – reference the Barrow Blueway as it provides an intra and inter regional route.

BROADBAND

Broadband is a priority for rural areas in order to attract enterprise and employment. The policy in this area should be to expedite the roll out of Broadband not just to support it. The current policy states: -

- *RPO 8.23 Local Authorities shall support and facilitate delivery of the National Broadband Plan.*

It is suggested that it should be rephrased as follows:

- *To expedite the implementation of the National Broadband Plan (NBP).*

CHAPTER 9 - QUALITY OF LIFE

Laois County Council wishes to make the following observation and submission on this chapter. Laois County Council in collaboration with numerous stakeholders has delivered successfully on improving the quality of life for its citizens over the last regional plan period. This theme runs through each of the chapters of the Draft RSES. The Council has in recent years prepared and is implementing the following additional strategies to those previously done

- *Age Friendly Strategy 2016-2021*
- *Healthy Laois Plan 2018-2020*

HOUSING

Housing supply within County Laois has been stifled by the affordability issue. There needs to be some provision made to investigate the possibility of creating schemes to allow for the development of serviced sites or affordable homes on state lands or in conjunction with delivery by Voluntary Housing Bodies.

PLACE MAKING

Portlaoise Town Team was established in 2017 and works together as a collaborative response to improving the town, actions such as branding, marketing, carrying out vacancy surveys, shop front and public space enhancement schemes, etc have been rolled out. This is a feature of many towns of this size and smaller within the region. Due recognition should be given to this collaborative structure in this section as place making is only as good as those that are involved both voluntarily, at local government level and from relevant stakeholders. We would suggest the following RPO –

- **Support the establishment of Town Team structures to implement the actions of plans adopted by Local Authorities for the purpose of better placemaking.**

REGENERATION

RPO9.9 makes no reference to the outer region and what percentage of development should take place within compact urban areas.

CHILD CARE, EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Laois County Council welcomes the requirement to assess need regarding schools provision and included in statutory plans. It is considered that the Dept of Education and skills should be cross referenced in this policy to require their input into this needs assessment.

- ***RPO 9.16 include reference to requiring the Dept of education and skills consult with LA's in relation to new school locations.***

CHAPTER 10 - INFRASTRUCTURE

Laois County Council wishes to make the following observation and submission on this chapter. The following suggested Policy Objectives for Future Electricity and Gas Supply and Demand need to be incorporated in order to ensure there is a safe and secure supply that will help to deliver the actions of the climate change agenda in relation to reducing carbon emissions and promoting the use of electric vehicles in both private and public capacities:

- ***Support the sustainable development of renewable wind energy (on shore and off shore) at appropriate locations and related grid infrastructure in the EMRA in compliance with national Wind Energy Guidelines.***
- ***Support the sustainable technology upgrading and conversion of power stations in the EMRA Region to use energy efficient and renewable energy sources.***

- *Work closely with Irish Water to revise the Draft Investment Plan (2020-2024) and subsequent investment plans to align the supply of water services with the settlement strategy and objectives of the EMRA Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.*
 - *Delivery and phasing of services shall be subject to the required appraisal, planning and environmental assessment processes and shall avoid adverse impacts on the integrity of the Natura 2000 network.*
 - *Local Authority Core Strategies shall demonstrate compliance with DHPLG Water Services Guidelines for Planning Authorities and demonstrate phased infrastructure led growth to meet demands on the water supply, suitability of new and/or existing drinking water sources (for example hydromorphological pressures) and prevent adverse impacts the integrity of water dependent habitats and species within the Natura 2000 network.*

CHAPTER 11 - ALL ISLAND COHESION

We acknowledge the importance of All island cohesion which will be to the benefit of the citizens of the country.

We would however expect that there should be a section within this chapter which summarises the connectivity and intra regional policies objectives with the Southern Regional assembly.

This is of particular relevance to Counties on the periphery of the EMRA region where there has to be alignment with objectives to deliver key pieces of infrastructure such as the N80 – from the perspective of County Laois and other intra regional routes, linked blueways and greenways such as the Barrow Blueway and energy initiatives such as the development of Lisheen Mine in the south of the region.

We welcome the policy objectives to do a Joint Urban Area plan for Graiguecullen in collaboration with Carlow County Council as stated under RPO 4.49 in chapter 4 People and Places.

CHAPTER 12 - IMPLEMENTATION AND MONIROTING

Local Authorities are instrumental in enabling the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies to be realised through the County Development Plan and LECP processes. Both of which implementation is monitored. We note the requirement for a progress report at 2 yearly intervals to monitor implementation.

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

We also note the proposal RPO 12.4 to establish an implementation group. We support this objective as it is crucial to be able to review the implementation of the RSES in the context of

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

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

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

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Co. Laois.

15th January 2019

Re: Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy

Dear Angela,

Further to the submission to Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA) with regard to the new Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, and further to consultation with the elected members of Laois County Council, we would like to ensure that our policy in relation to the provision of rural housing is protected, which we believe adequately facilitates those that have a genuine reason to live in the countryside subject to proper planning and sustainable development and environmental protection standards.

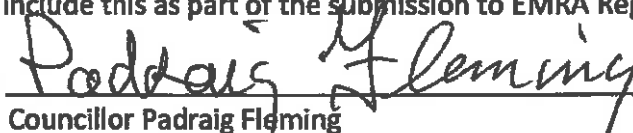
The following is the Policy of the LAOIS County Development Plan 2017-2023 which we would like to see included in the new Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy. It is an objective to recognise the individual housing needs of people intrinsic to the rural areas located within the areas defined as 'rural areas under strong urban influence' and 'Strong Rural Areas'. Such needs may be accommodated on lands within the rural area under strong urban influence, subject to the availability of a suitable site and normal proper planning and sustainable development criteria.

It is an objective of the Council **only** to permit single houses in the area under strong urban influence and Strong Rural Area to facilitate those with a local rural housing need in the area, in particular those that have lived in an rural area. In order to demonstrate a genuine rural housing need, any of the following criteria shall be met:

- a) the application is being made by a long term landowner or his/her son or daughter seeking to build their **first** home on the family lands; or
- b) the applicant is engaged in working the family farm and the house is for that persons own use; or
- c) the applicant is working in rural activities¹ and for this reason needs to be accommodated near their place of work; or
- d) the application is being made by a local rural person(s) who have spent a substantial period of their life living in the local rural area, and, who for family and/or work reasons need to live in the rural area.

Please include this as part of the submission to EMRA Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

Signed


Councillor Padraig Fleming

On behalf of the 19 elected members of Laois County Council
