



Tionól Reigiúnach Oirthir agus Lár-Tíre Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

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Draft Laois Local Economic and Community Plan

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly notes the publication of the draft documents for the Laois Local Economic and Community Plan and sets out hereunder observations on behalf of the Regional Assembly. The submission has been prepared by the executive of the Regional Assembly and approved by the elected members of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly at the meeting of 8th December 2023.

1.0 Overall Context

1.1 Role and Function of the Regional Assembly

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) is part of the regional tier of governance in Ireland. It is primarily focused on driving regional development through the formulation, adoption and implementation of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), oversight and coordination of County Development Plans and Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs), management of EU Programmes, EU project participation, implementation of national economic policy and additional functions working with the National Oversight and Audit Commission. As a strategic policy body, EMRA also participates in the consultation processes of other relevant strategic plans and policies.

This submission relates to the statutory role of the Assembly regarding the Laois Local Economic and Community Plan.

1.2 Legislative Context

Section 44 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 (amending Section 66C of the Local Government Act 2001), provides that every Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) shall be consistent with any Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy as well as the City/County Development Plan that applies to the area of the LECP. It also states that the Local Authority shall submit a draft of the economic and community elements of the LECP to the Regional Assembly and it shall adopt a statement on the draft Plan for consideration by the Elected Members of that Local Authority.

The Act requires that the consideration of a draft plan by the Regional Assembly, shall relate to its consistency with—

- (i) the core strategy and the objectives of the development plan of the local authority concerned,
- (ii) any regional spatial and economic strategy that may apply, and
- (iii) the need to consider consistency between the economic and community elements of the draft plan.

The Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP) Guidelines 2021, published in November 2021, assist with the preparation of the draft LECPs, with a key focus on sustainability, consultation and engagement with local communities and businesses. The guidelines also require local authorities to consider housing needs when formulating both the economic and community elements of their LECPs in accordance with the commitment in Housing for All, the Government's national plan for housing to 2030.

The LECP process consists of two parts: the development of an overall LECP framework detailing the High-Level Goals and sustainable community and economic objectives, including outcomes for a six-year period; and the development of Implementation Plans of the objectives of the LECP.

1.3 The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region was made by the Members of the Assembly in June 2019 and is a strategic plan and investment framework to shape future growth throughout the Region. The overall vision of the Strategy is to create a sustainable and competitive Region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunity for all. The vision is supported by sixteen Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs) that are framed around three key principles of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity.

A primary statutory objective of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) is to support the implementation of the National Planning Framework (NPF), alignment with the investment priorities of the National Development Plan 2021-2030 (and thus Project Ireland 2040), by coupling new development with the requisite investment in services and infrastructure. The RSES is of critical importance for the delivery of Project Ireland 2040, given that it is the succeeding tier of policy delivery in Ireland.

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region presents a Spatial Strategy, devised and informed by a complementary Economic Strategy, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. This includes championing the capital city of Dublin as a smart, climate resilient and global city region; identifying Regional Growth Centres which act as regional economic drivers and supports for their wider catchment areas; and promoting a network of large economically active Key Towns that provide employment and services to their surrounding areas. All of this is supported by Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and a network of multifaceted Rural Places. The RSES identifies Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns within the Region, however Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and Rural areas are to be defined by Development Plans.

The RSES identifies Portlaoise as a Key Town. Portlaoise is located in the Gateway Region (which includes the Midlands and north east border areas, outside the Core Region, which are strategically located as inter-regional portals to the Northern and Western, and Southern Regions) and is a large economically active town providing important connections with adjoining regions with the capacity and future growth potential to accommodate above average growth in tandem with the requisite investment in employment creation, services, amenities and sustainable transport. The RSES states that given the strategic location of Portlaoise, the maintenance and upgrading of transport links are required to enhance connectivity within and beyond the Region, to facilitate economic potential and enhance quality of life; this includes the motorway network, as Portlaoise benefits from direct access onto the M7 and the national road networks including the N77 and N80 routes. The service provided by the Dublin-Cork rail line is required within the settlement and provides regular daily services to Cork, Killarney, Limerick and Dublin.

The key priorities for the town of Portlaoise, as outlined in the RSES, are job creation and the facilitation of economic development. The RSES identifies Portlaoise as having a strong economic base, including in the Global Business and ICT Service sectors, agri-business sector and the public services sector. The RSES identifies the J17 National Enterprise Park (formerly Togher Inland Port), located to the southwest of Portlaoise town centre, as an area that has significant potential for the development of the economic base of Portlaoise. In this regard a masterplan was prepared in 2018 for the area which sets out to achieve objectives which will contribute to the future prosperity of Portlaoise and will facilitate industrial, commercial and enterprise development.

The Economic Strategy of the RSES has five key principles which include smart specialisation, clustering, placemaking, orderly growth and future proof. This Strategy includes a retail hierarchy for the Region, as outlined in the RSES under Chapter 6 Table 6.1, which identifies Portlaoise as Level 2 [Major Town Centres and County (Principal) Town Centres], along with Portarlinton and Graiguecullen as Level 3 [Town and/or District Centres and Sub-County Town Centres (Key Service Centres)] within the retail hierarchy.

The RSES also identifies the regeneration of the town as a key priority for Portlaoise. In this respect the town comprises a number of opportunity sites including James Fintan Lalor Avenue, Lyster Square and laneways connection with the Main Street, Fort Protector and Fitzmaurice Place, the Schools site and the former Bank of Ireland Branch/Prison Officers' Club. Also, the RSES refers to the strategy *"2040 and Beyond – A Vision for Portlaoise, A strategy for a Better Town Centre"*, completed in 2017, which sets out principles and a programme of regeneration for the town. Furthermore, the provision of a mixture of well-designed housing types at appropriate locations will facilitate and contribute to the ongoing regeneration, consolidation and renewal of the town and in this regard the RSES refers to a number of opportunity sites in Portlaoise that offer potential to deliver consolidated residential development over the short, medium and long term, such as the Maltings Site on Mountmellick Road, Centrepoint Site on the Mountrath Road and the former school sites within the town centre.

The RSES recognises that Portlaoise has a rich architectural heritage, and the town centre is designated as an Architectural Conservation Area. The RSES notes that Portlaoise obtained funding through the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund for a Cultural Quarter, focusing on landmark buildings such as the Fort Protector and Old St. Peter's Church. In terms of natural heritage, the development

of the River Triogue Blueway is noted as a considerable amenity and tourism resource for the town, linking the People's Park in the south to the Linear Park in the north. The RSES also identifies the accessibility of the Slieve Bloom Mountains from Portlaoise as a key natural heritage asset.

Lastly, it should be noted that Graiguecullen - Carlow is identified in the RSES as a Key Town and whilst Carlow is largely located within the Southern Regional Assembly's functional area, part of the town around Graiguecullen is located within County Laois and so within the functional area of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly. The RSES states that the preparation and adoption of a joint local area plan is a priority for Carlow and Laois County Councils in order to provide a coordinated planning framework to identify and deliver strategic sites and regeneration areas, so that a minimum of 30% compact growth can be achieved.

The draft LECP documents submitted make reference to key spatial planning, economic, social and community elements of the RSES in order to demonstrate consistency with same. This is discussed further in Section 3.

2.0 Overview of the draft Framework LECP

The draft LECP documents for Laois were received on 27th October 2023 and contains the following five documents:

- Laois County Council LECP Consultation Report August 2023
- High-Level Goals
- Development of Sustainable Objectives and High-Level Outcomes
- Appendix A Socio-Economic Statement
- Appendix B Socio-Economic Profile

The overall direction of the draft LECP for County Laois is guided by ten High-Level Goals which seek to recognise the challenges that the County will face over the lifetime of the LECP. The goals provide the core aims of the LECP and represent how County Laois should grow over the lifetime of the plan. The High-Level Goals reflect the socio-economic analysis undertaken and were refined through public as well as stakeholder consultation.

The content of the draft LECP documentation, including the High-Level Goals, will be discussed in the following sections of this report.

3.0 Evaluation of Consistency with the RSES

The draft LECP documents have been prepared in accordance with the Local Government Reform Act 2014 and having regard to the recommendations set out in the LECP Guidelines 2021. In this regard, the following are noted from the documentation submitted to EMRA for consideration.

3.1 Policy Context

Having reviewed the draft LECP documentation submitted, the documents do not refer to the regional or local policy context of the draft LECP. In this regard the Regional Assembly recommends that additional sections are included which should explicitly reference regional and local policy, in particular referencing the key priorities of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region in relation to County Laois, in order to demonstrate consistency with same. Notwithstanding the reference to Portlaoise as a Key Town in the High-Level Goals document submitted, it is considered that the additional policy alignment section should clearly identify Portlaoise as a Key Town within the Gateway region. The Regional Assembly also considers that the draft LECP documentation could be enhanced further by setting out the retail hierarchy for the Region, as outlined in the RSES under Chapter 6, Table 6.1 in so far as it relates to County Laois.

An additional section should also be included to clearly demonstrate that the LECP is consistent with the core strategy and objectives of the Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027, in accordance with the LECP Guidelines 2021.

3.2 Socio-Economic Profile, SCO Analysis and Consultation Process

A Socio-Economic Statement has been submitted as Appendix A which comprises a profile of County Laois, including key facts, trends, strengths and opportunities relevant to economic and community development, and Census information on housing, demographics, social indicators, educational attainment, economy and employment statistics and environmental figures. A Socio-Economic Profile contained at Appendix B has also been submitted and it is stated that much of this data is based on the 2016 Census. In this respect the Regional Assembly recommends that up-to-date Census data should be used, where available.

The Socio-Economic Statement states that County Laois has a population of 91,657, ranging from the town of Portlaoise to the towns of Abbeyleix and Stradbally. Other towns in the County include Portarlinton and Mountmellick to the north, Graiguecullen to the south and Rathdowney to the west. The Socio-Economic Statement also states that Laois has experienced significant population growth, increasing 8.2% between 2016 and 2022 and that the population of the County in 2022 was 73% higher than it was in 1996. The Socio-Economic Statement outlines that the Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027 references the National Planning Framework which projects that the population of County Laois will increase from 84,500 in 2016 to a high of between 95,500-97,500 in 2031. The Statement also states that preliminary results from the 2022 Census indicate that there has been an increase of 5.8% in housing growth between 2016 and 2022. It states that the vacancy rate stands at 7.6% with the proportion of houses vacant in 2016 and 2022 standing at 2.3%.

In relation to employment and the economy, the Socio-Economic Statement outlines that in 2023, the number of persons on the live register in County Laois was 3,264 (1.7% of the national figure) or 3.6% of the total population of the County. Portlaoise is the primary centre of employment in the County, with almost 8,410 jobs in 2016. There are four IDA supported firms located within the County, with an associated employment of 121 people. Furthermore, it is stated that €2.17 million has been paid out by Laois LEO for the period January 2018 to December 2022 to support the creation of 308 jobs in the County.

The Socio-Economic Statement was utilised to support the public consultation phase. The LECP Consultation Report submitted outlines that public consultation was undertaken to inform the LECP and that the principal methods of engagement included online surveys, stakeholder and community workshops. A detailed list of Strengths, Challenges and Opportunities (SCO) for County Laois has also been outlined which is welcomed by the Regional Assembly. The community workshops contained an overview of the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis and a local project identification exercise, whereby participants were asked to identify projects requiring funding in their local area. When asked for their aspirations for the LECP, respondents called for investment in infrastructure (including active/green travel infrastructure and community infrastructure).

3.3 High-Level Goals, Objectives and Outcomes

The Regional Assembly notes that the analysis of the socio-economic profile of the County and the public consultation have resulted in the formulation of draft High-Level Goals, accompanying sustainable objectives and high-level outcomes, which will inform the actions to be determined as part of the Implementation Plan.

The LECP Guidelines 2021 recommend that High-Level Goals should be achievable and realistic. The Regional Assembly notes that a Strengths, Challenges and Opportunities (SCO) Analysis has been used to inform the development of each High-Level Goal. The High-Level Goals document submitted states that a review of the LECP 2016-2021 was undertaken showing what was accomplished in the County as a result of previous goals. Each proposed High-Level Goal has related sustainable objectives however the Regional Assembly recommends that the sustainable objectives be classified into Sustainable Community Objectives (SCOs) and Sustainable Economic Development Objectives (SEDOs) as the SCOs and SEDOs are key priority areas within each High-Level Goal. Like the High-Level Goals, the development of the sustainable objectives was informed by consultation with the community and stakeholders, as well as by the socio-economic analysis.

The ten High-Level Goals, which are supported by sustainable objectives and high-level outcomes, are listed as follows:

- High-Level Goal 1: Encourage civic participation and support local communities to lead on their own developments.
- High-Level Goal 2: Develop and promote ways of living and of doing business that support a sustainable environment and resilient communities.
- High-Level Goal 3: Encourage a sustainable culture of innovation and entrepreneurship throughout the County.
- High-Level Goal 4: Help the local economy to diversify in a long-term, sustainable manner, broadening employment opportunities in the County.
- High-Level Goal 5: Recognise and support diversity in the county, promoting equality, integration, and inclusiveness across all sectors.
- High-Level Goal 6: Sustain, develop, and enhance town and village centres as focal points for their communities.
- High-Level Goal 7: Support an integrated and holistic approach to education, training, and employment along with life-long learning.
- High-Level Goal 8: Promote well-being and excellent quality of life within the county.
- High-Level Goal 9: Strengthen and encourage a strong sense of pride in the county and promote our unique identity.

- High-Level Goal 10: Promote the county as a key location for foreign and domestic investment.

Overall, the Regional Assembly is satisfied with the selection of the ten High-Level goals and the stated sustainable objectives, based on the evidence-based approach used and the socio-economic profile which was used to develop the goals. The Regional Assembly is satisfied that the chosen goals align with the 3 Key Principles of the RSES, the 16 Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs) of the RSES and with a number of relevant RPOs of the RSES.

It is noted that each High-Level Goal is supported by a goal breakdown, a theme, an impact and linkages to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A cross compliance table identifying links between the Sustainable Objectives and Themes of the High-Level Goals has also been submitted which is welcomed by the Regional Assembly. The five themes, which align with the 3 Key Principles of the RSES, have been listed as 1) Health and Wellbeing, 2) Economic Development, 3) Community and Local Development, 4) Climate Action and 5) Integrated and Ongoing.

Each High-Level Goal with their supporting sustainable objectives is discussed in more detail below:

High-Level Goal 1 – Encourage civic participation and support local communities to lead on their own developments:

This High-Level Goal focuses on encouraging active participation and is intended to develop and enable individuals and communities within County Laois, and it aims to ensure that members of the community can take part in all aspects of society.

Theme: Community and Local Development

[Linkages indicated to SDG Nos 3, 5, 10, 11 and 16].

This High-Level Goal relating to civic participation contains the following Sustainable Objectives;

Sustainable Objective 1.1	To increase the depth of community participation and civic engagement across the county.
Sustainable Objective 1.2	Build capacity and skills within individuals and groups to take leadership roles within their communities.
Sustainable Objective 1.3	To increase the breadth of community-led development across the county.

Healthy Placemaking is one of the Key Principles of the RSES and the RSES highlights that the availability of, and access to, services is key to healthier places. In this respect, this High-Level Goal will promote increased community participation and greater social capital through support for related policies, strategies and programmes. High-Level Goal 1 aligns with RSO 4 of the RSES in relation to healthy communities and RSO 5 in relation to Creative Places. It also aligns with Healthy Placemaking RPOs 9.10 - 9.13, with RPOs 9.1-9.2 regarding a diverse and inclusive region, ensuring the integration of age and family friendly strategies and supporting initiatives to increase participation and social integration of minority groups, and alignment with RPOs 9.18-9.19 to seek to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion and to work collaboratively with stakeholders to plan for social infrastructure needs.

High-Level Goal 2 - Develop and promote ways of living and of doing business that support a sustainable environment and resilient communities:

High-Level Goal 2 seeks to support businesses and local communities in protecting and enhancing local biodiversity in a sustainable manner in order to reduce carbon footprint. The aim is to ensure that sustainability and environmentally aware habits must be factored into all areas of life in County Laois.

Theme: Economic Development, Community and Local Development, Climate Action, Integrated and Ongoing.

[Linkages indicated to SDG Nos 7-9, 11-13 and 15].

This High-Level Goal for a sustainable environment and resilient communities contains the following Sustainable Objectives;

Sustainable Objective 2.1	Support initiatives that allow businesses/enterprises to become more sustainable and environmentally friendly and to target environmentally conscious markets.
Sustainable Objective 2.2	Assist communities and their citizens to take actions that address the causes and impact of climate change at local level.
Sustainable Objective 2.3	Protect the quality of life in rural communities, supporting a sustainable rural economy and environment.
Sustainable Objective 2.4	Provide for public and community spaces and infrastructure that supports individuals to live in a more sustainable manner.

This High-Level Goal supports the 3 Key Principles of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity outlined in the RSES, including RSO's in relation to integrated transport and land use (RSO 6), building climate resilience (RSO 8), supporting the transition to low carbon and clean energy (RSO 9), enhancing green infrastructure (RSO 10) and biodiversity and natural heritage (RSO 11).

This High-Level Goal also demonstrates consistency with RPO 3.7 in the RSES in relation to sustainable growth, RPO 6.31 in relation to innovation capacity to create a distributed network of co-working hubs, RPO 6.23 relating to a low carbon and circular economy, RPOs 7.16, 7.17 and 7.19 in relation to biodiversity and natural heritage, RPOs 7.22-7.23 in relation to green infrastructure, RPOs 7.27-7.29 regarding landscape, RPOs 7.30 - 7.34 in relation to climate change, RPOs 7.35 – 7.38 in relation to decarbonising the energy sector, and RPOs 7.39 - 7.41 in relation to low energy buildings. Furthermore, the High-Level Goal aligns with RPO 8.7 in the RSES in relation to mobility management and sustainable transport use, RPOs 8.2 and 8.3 in relation to the integration of transport and land use planning and Portlaoise Key Town RPO 4.72 in the RSES to support the transition of Portlaoise to a low carbon town centre by reducing car use and promoting walking and cycling. This High-Level Goal also supports a Just Transition to clean energy as outlined in the RSES Climate Strategy Figure 7.4.

High-Level Goal 3 - Encourage a sustainable culture of innovation and entrepreneurship throughout the County:

The third High-Level Goal centres on supporting both new and existing businesses throughout County Laois, taking advantage of excellent road and rail transport networks in addition to the highly skilled local workforce. This goal aims to strengthen local employment in County Laois.

Theme: Economic Development, Community and Local Development, Integrated and Ongoing.

[Linkages indicated to SDG Nos 4, 8 and 9].

This High-Level Goal of entrepreneurship contains the following Sustainable Objectives;

Sustainable Objective 3.1	To provide for practical encouragement, support, and advice to those looking to innovate or start their own business.
Sustainable Objective 3.2	To enhance the attractiveness of the offering in hubs and co-working centres as part of providing supports to start-up companies and remote workers.
Sustainable Objective 3.3	To encourage additional off-farm and alternative enterprises to support a changing rural economy.
Sustainable Objective 3.4	Promote business participation and enterprise among those currently underrepresented in the business sector.

High-Level Goal 3 supports the Key Principle of Economic Opportunity as outlined in the RSES and aligns with RSO 12 in relation to a strong economy and RSO 13 in relation to improving education skills and social inclusion. The objectives of High-Level Goal 3 also support the five principles of the Economic Strategy of the RSES which are listed as smart specialisation, clustering, placemaking, orderly growth and future proof. In addition, High-Level Goal 3 supports RPO 6.24 in relation to the competitiveness of the agri-sector and RPOs 6.26 and 6.27 in relation to skills and innovation.

High-Level Goal 4 – Help the local economy to diversify in a long-term, sustainable manner, broadening employment opportunities in the County:

The fourth High-Level Goal seeks to promote the local economy and provide leadership in increasing employment levels in the County by attracting foreign investment as well as focusing on local enterprises.

Theme: Economic Development, Integrated and Ongoing.

[Linkages indicated to SDG Nos 4, 8, 9 and 10].

This High-Level Goal of employment opportunities contains the following Sustainable Objectives;

Sustainable Objective 4.1	To support business to develop and expand a skilled and talented workforce.
Sustainable Objective 4.2	To work with the range of infrastructure suppliers (e.g., data, power, transport, water, public realm) to have a sufficient standard of infrastructure provision to attract and service new and developing economic sectors.
Sustainable Objective 4.3	To market Laois as a vibrant destination for business and tourism.
Sustainable Objective 4.4	To work with Midlands Ireland and national enterprise agencies to position the county as an attractive investment location for high value sectors.
Sustainable Objective 4.5	To assist communities affected by changes in employment and economic decline especially those affected by Just Transition or climate change impacts.

High-Level Goal 4 aligns with RSO 12 as outlined in the RSES in relation to a strong economy. The High-Level Goal aligns with Portlaoise Key Town RPO 4.73 to support the vision and objectives of the J17

National Enterprise Park Masterplan, which aims to deliver a viable economic zone within Portlaoise to accommodate a range of businesses. It also aligns with RPOs 8.25-8.26 in relation to broadband and digital infrastructure, RPO 6.5 (rural economy) in relation to supporting innovation, including ICT-based industries, and RPO 4.27 in relation to Key Towns acting as economic drivers.

One of the Growth Enablers for the Gateway Region in the RSES is to promote the Region as a key destination for tourism, leisure and recreation activities and support the development of an integrated network of greenways, blueways and peatways. In this respect this High-Level Goal aligns with RPOs 6.15-6.18 in relation to natural and cultural tourism assets.

High-Level Goal 5 – Recognise and support diversity in the county, promoting equality, integration, and inclusiveness across all sectors:

High-Level Goal 5 intends to support all sectors of our society to ensure the voice of all, including the most excluded, is heard across all sectors while identifying, acknowledging and integrating the diverse need within County Laois.

Theme: Community and Local Development, Health and Wellbeing, Economic Development, Integrated and Ongoing.

[Linkages indicated to SDG Nos 1, 3, 5, 10, 11 and 16].

This High-Level Goal of equality and integration contains the following Sustainable Objectives;

Sustainable Objective 5.1	To work to support equity in social participation and employment opportunities, particularly across areas of disability, disadvantage, diversity, and ethnic backgrounds.
Sustainable Objective 5.2	To target specific groups, by needs, in the promotion of broader health and physical activity.
Sustainable Objective 5.3	To reduce barriers to participation in the breadth of economic and social life by those in less advantaged sectors of society.

High-Level Goal 5 and these sustainable objectives support the Key Principle of Healthy Placemaking in the RSES, including RSO 4 in relation to Healthy Communities and RSO 5 regarding Creative Places. These objectives also demonstrate consistency with RPO 9.13 in the RSES in relation to social infrastructure developments being accessible and inclusive for a range of users and RPO 9.14 in relation to supporting the provision of easily accessible social, community, cultural and recreational facilities. The Socio-Economic Statement document submitted also outlines that Portlaoise is the Head Office for *Youth Work Ireland Laois* which aims to empower young people within County Laois.

High-Level Goal 6 – Sustain, develop, and enhance town and village centres as focal points for their communities:

The sixth High-Level Goal aims to grow and enhance the towns and villages of County Laois, while safeguarding the cultural and natural heritage, making County Laois an attractive place to live, work and visit.

Theme: Community and Local Development, Economic Development.

[Linkages indicated to SDG Nos 3, 11 and 13].

This High-Level Goal of enhancing town and village centres contains the following Sustainable Objectives;

Sustainable Objective 6.1	To make our towns and villages attractive places to live and work through the provision and upgrade of both community and appropriate public infrastructure.
Sustainable Objective 6.2	To encourage opportunities for arts, culture and social events in our towns and villages.
Sustainable Objective 6.3	To encourage the re-use/re-purposing of properties and sites within our towns and villages to address vacancy and underutilisation.

High-Level Goal 6 supports the Key Principle of Healthy Placemaking in the RSES and aligns with RSO 1 in relation to Sustainable Settlement Patterns and several RPOs, including RPOs 9.8 and 9.9 in relation to supporting regeneration, RPOs 6.12-6.14 in relation to town centre renewal and RPO 6.4 in relation to identifying measures in LECPs for regeneration in small towns and village cores. This High-Level Goal also aligns with the Portlaoise Key Town RPO 4.71 to support delivery of the Portlaoise Regeneration and Development Demonstration Project and assist the local authority in seeking funding opportunities for delivery of regeneration development.

High-Level Goal 7 – Support an integrated and holistic approach to education, training, and employment along with life-long learning:

High-Level Goal 7 seeks to encourage the development of training and employment opportunities in County Laois and seeks to establish and maintain long-term working partnerships between agencies to ensure the development and enhancement of the existing workforce.

Theme: Economic Development, Integrated and Ongoing.

[Linkages indicated to SDG Nos 1, 4, 8 and 9].

This High-Level Goal relating to education and training contains the following Sustainable Objectives;

Sustainable Objective 7.1	To continue to support improvements in educational attainment and skills.
Sustainable Objective 7.2	To reduce barriers to participation in education and training.
Sustainable Objective 7.3	To address the factors which result in imbalances in educational attainment statistics between different regions of the county.

High-Level Goal 7 supports the Key Principle of Economic Opportunity as outlined in the RSES and aligns with RSO 13 in relation to education. This High-Level Goal and sustainable objectives align to the skills and innovation RPOs 6.25-6.27, RPO 6.38 in relation to lifelong learning programmes and upskilling and RPO 9.22 in relation to supporting the role of Higher Education Institutions.

The High-Level Goals document submitted states that of the total population in County Laois aged 15 years and over, 26.2% (13,973 persons) attain third level education, significantly lower than the State average of 33.4%, the 8th lowest in the State. The Socio-Economic Statement submitted outlines that the Laois Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB) promotes adult education through Portlaoise and Portarlinton Further Education and Training Centres. It is noted that the Laois LEO office also

offers business information and advice, business skills training and mentoring support to businesses in County Laois.

High-Level Goal 8 – Promote well-being and excellent quality of life within the county:

High-Level Goal 8 will focus on promoting good health and well-being across all communities in County Laois. This goal will aim to enable good physical health and mental wellbeing for all and lessen inequalities for all generations.

Theme: Health and Wellbeing, Community and Local Development.

[Linkages indicated to SDG Nos 1, 3, 11, 13 and 16].

This High-Level Goal relating to health and wellbeing contains the following Sustainable Objectives;

Sustainable Objective 8.1	To support the availability of community level meeting spaces where people can meet and interact socially.
Sustainable Objective 8.2	To improve access to recreational facilities to increase participation in foundation level sport and in exercise across all ages.
Sustainable Objective 8.3	To support the development of events and facilities that enhance cultural expression and creativity.

High-Level Goal 8 supports the Key Principle of Healthy Placemaking as outlined in the RSES and aligns with RSO 5 Creative Places and with the recreation and open space RPOs in the RSES, listed as RPOs 9.14 - 9.17, in addition to RPOs 9.24 and 9.25 in relation to arts, culture and heritage. The High-Level Goals document submitted states that the Dunamaise Art Centre provides facilities and opportunities for artistic and cultural events for the holding of performances. Regarding health and wellbeing, it is noted that High-Level Goal 8 aligns with RPO 9.23 in the RSES for the provision of health services and the Portlaoise Key Town RPO 4.74, which aims to support the development and expansion of the Midlands Regional Hospital at Portlaoise, an acute hospital that serves the catchment areas of Counties Laois, Offaly, Kildare, Carlow and Tipperary.

High-Level Goal 9 – Strengthen and encourage a strong sense of pride in the county and promote our unique identity:

High-Level Goal 9 places a strong emphasis in advocating pride in places to live and work in County Laois.

Theme: Community and Local Development, Climate Action, Health and Wellbeing.

[Linkages indicated to SDG Nos 3, 11, 13 and 16].

This High-Level Goal relating to pride of place and identity contains the following Sustainable Objectives;

Sustainable Objective 9.1	Document and celebrate the achievements of individuals and local communities in achieving positive goals for the county.
Sustainable Objective 9.2	Provide opportunities to record and publicise the extent of aspects of the county’s heritage, biodiversity, and cultural achievements.
Sustainable Objective 9.3	Through festivals and events promote opportunities for people to celebrate locally.

High-Level Goal 9 supports the Key Principle of Healthy Placemaking as outlined in the RSES, aligns with RSO 5 Creative Places, and demonstrates consistency with RPO 9.14 in the RSES in relation to accessible social, community, cultural and recreational facilities. Regarding events, the High-Level Goals document submitted states that the National Ploughing Championship was held in Ratheniska in 2022 attracting 277,000 visitors, and that since 2004 Stradbally has hosted the annual festival ‘Electric Picnic’, attracting in excess of 70,000 revellers per annum. The Socio-Economic Statement submitted outlines that the marketing and promotion of County Laois, in collaboration with the Laois Chamber of Commerce, the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and the business community, will continue to be one of the main goals in the future.

High-Level Goal 10 – Promote the county as a key location for foreign and domestic investment:

High-Level Goal 10 centres on promoting all corners of the County to attract investment by both local businesses and large-scale foreign investment. This High-Level Goal will aim to promote County Laois and its distinctive characteristics and skilled workforce.

Theme: Economic Development, Integrated and Ongoing.

[Linkages indicated to SDG Nos 8 and 9].

This High-Level Goal relating to domestic and foreign investment contains the following Sustainable Objectives;

Sustainable Objective 10.1	To research and regularly update key business data from Laois to support the competitive advantages of doing business in Laois.
Sustainable Objective 10.2	Through research and regularly updating key social provision data (for example leisure, schools, preschools, youth provision, etc) to help ensure that social/community infrastructure continues to be available for a developing workforce (and their families) outside of their working lives.
Sustainable Objective 10.3	Encourage and develop sector-based clusters to highlight quality outputs from the county.

High-Level Goal 10 supports the Key Principle of Economic Opportunity as outlined in the RSES and aligns with RSO 12 relating to a strong economy supported by enterprise and innovation. This High-Level Goal and sustainable objectives also align with RPO 6.1 in the RSES regarding a competitive and resilient economic base and RPO 6.31 in relation to innovation capacity to create a distributed network of co-working hubs. The High-Level Goals document submitted states that Laois has a strong network of co-working hubs (six sites) and that the local workforce is skilled with 26.2% of people having attained a third level qualification and a further 20% holding a vocational apprenticeship qualification.

3.4 Implementation

The LECP Guidelines 2021 state that an LECP should be delivered through a series of three two-year Implementation Plans in order to achieve the relevant targets. From a review of the draft LECP documentation submitted, a specific Implementation Plan has not clearly been provided for assessment. In the interests of clarity, the Regional Assembly notes that an Implementation Plan is required by the LECP Guidelines 2021 and should therefore be prepared and form part of the LECP documentation.

4.0 Evaluation of Consistency with the Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027

Section 44 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 (amending Section 66C of the Local Government Act 2001) states that LECPs should be consistent with the core strategy and objectives of the Development Plan, in this respect the Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027. Given that the Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027 was deemed to be consistent with the RSES, as acknowledged by the submission made by EMRA on 12th March 2021, the Regional Assembly therefore considers that an analysis of the RSES is deemed sufficient in order to demonstrate consistency. Notwithstanding this, it is considered beneficial if the Laois LECP documentation could address the Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027 in order to demonstrate that it aligns with and complements the policies and objectives and identified priorities in the County Development Plan.

5.0 Recommendation and Statement of Consistency

The Regional Assembly commends the work of Laois County Council to date in the preparation of the draft LECP documentation and issues a Statement of Consistency for the Laois LECP as required under Section 44 of the Local Government Reform Act (as amended) subject to the following recommendations:

- The LECP documentation should include a specific Framework document and Implementation Plan that is prepared and presented in accordance with the requirements of the LECP Guidelines 2021. The Implementation Plan may be included as an appendix of the LECP.
- The LECP is required to be consistent with the core strategy and objectives of the Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027, and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) 2019-2031. It is recommended that an additional section be included to clearly demonstrate this alignment with regional and local policy.
- The LECP documentation should make reference to the retail hierarchy for the Region, as outlined in the RSES Chapter 6 Table 6.1 which identifies Portlaoise as Level 2 [Major Town Centres and County (Principal) Town Centres], along with Portarlinton and Graiguecullen as Level 3 [Town and/or District Centres and Sub-County Town Centres (Key Service Centres)] within the retail hierarchy.
- Specific reference to Climate Action should be made within the heading of High-Level Goal 2 in order to demonstrate a clear link to this Key Principle of the RSES.
- The sustainable objectives should be differentiated between Sustainable Community Objectives (SCOs) and Sustainable Economic Development Objectives (SEDOs), in line with the LECP Guidelines 2021.
- The Socio-Economic Profile and Socio-Economic Statement should use Census 2022 data, where available.
- All appendices of the LECP should be included. Public consultation information, a list of written submissions and the membership of relevant structures (LCDC, SPC), as detailed in Appendix 2 of the LECP Guidelines 2021, should be provided.

6.0 Conclusion

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) welcomes the progression of the Local Economic and Community Plan and considers the sustainable objectives to be consistent with the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) 2019-2031 and the Laois County Development Plan (CDP) 2021-2027. However, as outlined above, it is considered that the draft LECP documentation could demonstrate integration of key references to, and stronger links, with policies and objectives of the RSES and the Laois CDP 2021-2027. Subject to the amendments listed in Section 5.0 of this report being incorporated into the finalised LECP, the Regional Assembly considers that the documentation would be consistent with the policies and objectives of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019-2031 and the Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027.

Regards,



Clare Bannon

A/Director

Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

8th December 2023