

# COUNCIL UNLAOISES LATEST ACTION PLANS

Laois has completed a 'healthy public engagement' process in relation to the County Development Plan in order to meet the soaring population demands in the county. John Mulholland, chief executive of Laois County Council, outlines their plan of action to Olivia Kelleher.

**L**aois County Council's Development Draft Plan went on public display for a ten-week period (5 August-13 October) last year, and the public consultation process was extended by a further five weeks to 17 November 2016.

The aim of the consultation process was to invite submissions on the policies and objectives contained in the Draft County Development Plan 2017-2023.

Public consultation meetings were advertised in the local media, on the internet and through the members of the Laois Public Participation Network (PPN) inviting all interested parties to attend public workshops.

Notices were also sent to a wide range of community, business and environmental organisations and other stakeholders, inviting them to participate in the consultation process. Public workshops were held in each of the three Municipal Districts of County Laois.

In a parallel process the council embarked on a



Laois is currently developing a new tourism strategy and chief executive John Mulholland says that the county has "massive potential for hosting events, conferences, festivals and activity-based tourism". (Pic: Alf Harvey, LaoisToday.ie)



In the space of two decades the population in Portlaoise has gone from 9,000 people to over 22,000 people.

public participation process to prepare a vision statement for the core town centre of Portlaoise. The objective of this vision statement is to envision a path for the development and reimagining of Portlaoise to cater for an urban population of 30,000 up to and beyond 2040, so that business can thrive and a critical mass of population can reside in the town centre close to services and transport.

## FASTEST POPULATION GROWTH

John Mulholland, chief executive of Laois County Council, says that Laois saw the fastest rate of population growth in Ireland in the ten-year period between 2006



The county's track record in hosting events such as as Electric Picnic is well established. This year's arts and music festival in Stradbally Hall takes place on 1-3 September.

and 2016, which was more than three times the national average. Moreover the population grew from less than 59,000 in 2002 to almost 85,000 in 2016 representing a remarkable growth rate of over 44%. By 2023 the county's population is predicted to reach almost 90,000.

He says with such growth comes challenges in terms of providing physical and social infrastructure and facilities. In common with a number of local authority areas the county also needs to meet the needs of a growing multicultural population.

"It is a question of providing a multicultural base and designing to meet current and future needs in partnership with people and organisations who have a track record in education, training and social integration. It is incumbent on the council, therefore, to work with voluntary bodies, the Laois Partnership Company, State departments and other agencies. We need to collaborate and provide a range of services to prevent the risk of cultural isolation and withdrawal from community that might occur."

The overall population target translates into a housing requirement of 2,136 new homes over the plan period to 2023 and accordingly the plan provides for 240 hectares of new residential development lands – divided between 78 hectares for

Portlaoise and 162 hectares in the rest of the county.

#### RURAL TO URBAN SHIFT

Mr Mulholland says the growth in Portlaoise has been quite extraordinary. "It has been quite remarkable. In the space of two decades the population in Portlaoise has gone from 9,000 people to over 22,000 people but we must be careful how future growth patterns are managed so that the core town centre maintains and recovers its soul and purpose. Somewhat alarmingly, there are only 600 people living in the town centre and the challenge is to redress this trend."

"It is now the largest town in the midlands. And as a county Laois has also seen a massive change from being rural to urban. People live where best suits them economically.

People choose to live in Laois for a number of reasons but mostly due to its proximity to the Greater Dublin Region and for ease of access by public transport or private transport to that region. The widening commuter belt from Dublin is a certainly a significant factor."

Mr Mulholland says Portlaoise is a vibrant and ever-growing town. "Portlaoise is obviously a meeting point for business people and has a strong trading reputation. It is seen as a good place to live and work



#### FACTFILE – JOHN MULHOLLAND

John Mulholland is a Civil Engineering graduate of NUIG and also holds post graduate qualifications in Environmental Protection and Project Management. He has extensive experience in the local authority sector, having served in many local authorities throughout the country.

Following periods as Design, Resident and Town Engineer he became Director of Services with Carlow County Council in 2001. Subsequently he took up duty as Director of Services with Kilkenny County Council in 2007 where he also acted as Chief Executive during 2014/2015. He took up his current position as Chief Executive with Laois County Council in September 2015 – a county in which he had previously worked in the mid-90s.

John considers himself fortunate to have led and worked with great teams of people in delivering the M8/M9 motorway projects, the River Basin Catchment Management Plan in the south east, in addition to working with many local communities to achieve modest but sustainable gains. He is particularly keen to sustain activity in urban renewal, preservation of heritage and generating economic development and growth in smaller towns and villages.

John is the current Chairman of the City and County Management Association's Environment, Climate Change and Emergency Planning Committee and is also Chair of the Midlands Chief Executives' Group.



The standard and excellence provided by the hospitality services is exemplified by the five-star luxury hotel Ballyfin House – listed ‘Best Hotel in the World’ in 2016 by Condé Nast.

and many Government and public services operate from the Portlaoise area”

The county’s chief executive also notes that Laois has a very young population, which he adds is a “positive development” looking to the future. “We have a large population of young people here – people who are under the age of 18. It is beneficial to society to have a young population and it can only be seen as a positive to Laois.”

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM

Laois County Council is mindful of the need to ensure that economic development and employment opportunities within the county are maximised in order to cater for the dramatic increase in population that has occurred.

The Council is seeking to optimise the location value of Portlaoise and recently signed off on the purchase of 75 acres of land at Junction 17 on the M7 motorway. The area is a point of convergence for traffic from Cork and Limerick to Dublin.

The Council also believes the site location has compelling strategic attributes given its designation as an Inland Port in the 2002 National Spatial Plan. The council has a “few ideas up its sleeves” and is speaking to stakeholders about the site.

Meanwhile, Laois is currently developing a new Tourism Strategy and John Mulholland says that the county has massive potential for hosting events, conferences, festivals and activity based tourism.

“The development of themes and tourism products around the Ancient East Brand is particularly exciting and has already brought local Heritage and Tourism providers together with the sense of bringing enhanced value and appreciation to our heritage assets and our landscape.

“The track record of the county is well established in hosting events, such as Electric Picnic and the Ploughing Championships,

while the standard and excellence provided by the hospitality services are second to none. Ballyfin House, for example, was listed Best Hotel in the World in 2016 by Condé Nast and Castle Durrow is rated highly on Trip Advisor.”

Laois County Council is also focusing on engaging the community in relation to community participation. The core proposition is that participation in cultural activity drives personal and collective creativity, with significant implications for individuals and societal wellbeing and achievement.

Laois demonstrated its unique capacity to activate and support community engagement and participation in marking the centenary year through a wide range of arts, culture and heritage initiatives. Laois County Council has established a cultural team who are representing expertise in the arts, library, heritage and community.

## DISTINCT QUALITIES

Mr Mulholland previously worked in Kilkenny and Carlow and says all of the counties have their own distinct qualities but equally many common points, namely very strong agricultural sectors, strong county towns and great local communities who continually work in a voluntary mode to enhance a sense of place making.

He notes the common threats and opportunities to historic town centres around the region. He believes that Portlaoise is a very good example of the provincial Irish county town trying hard to seek its own identity, its future function and to get back on its feet post recession.

Mr Mulholland says the onus is on Laois to develop Portlaoise town centre and other town centres around the county. “Town centres are at risk probably because of car dependency and the threat of out of town retail parks. There are a number of other factors, including on line purchasing, but one has to make sure that our future policies, both planning and fiscal, result in better opportunities for sustainable town centres.”