**Laois PPN / Creative Ireland Laois Seminar**

**Introduction**

This report arises from a public consultation hosted by Laois Public Participation Network (PPN) at the Killeshin Hotel, Portlaoise on Wednesday, January 17.

The event was organised with a view to compiling a submission from the PPN on the plans proposed by Creative Ireland –Laois, The Laois Arts Office, The Laois Library Service and the Sports and Recreation Office of Laois County Council.

Jim O’Brien facilitated the event and also compiled this report

Proceedings opened with a reading of the poem “My Ireland” read by poet Stephen James Smith, the current Artist in Residence in Laois.  This was followed by a presentation on the national Creative Ireland programme given by the national Co-ordinator of Creative Ireland, Sarah Keaveny. Catherine Casey, Heritage Officer at Laois County Council gave the local perspective and introduced the local Creative Ireland projects and plans.

Short presentations were then made on the Laois Arts Strategy 2018 - 2022, the Laois County Library Service and an overview of the current programmes and events undertaken by the Sports and Leisure Office of Laois County Council. These presentations were given by Bridie Keenan of the Arts Office, County Librarian Bernie Foran and Laois Sports and Recreation Officer, Anne Marie Maher.

Those attending had been asked to sit at tables according to their interest. The various tables were designated for discussion of the Laois Arts Strategy, the Laois Library Service and the Laois Sports and Recreation Office programme. The discussion on Creative Ireland issues was applicable to all tables.

Questions specific to the designation of the tables were circulated to each table while the Creative Ireland questions common to all.  Each table had a note taker and a facilitator. The note takers submitted the responses to the questions from each table and these were given to the facilitator who compiled this report.

A total of 80 people attended the event.

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**Workshop 1 Creative Ireland**

**Overall themes.**

While the responses to the questions and the topics covered in the discussions around the Creative Ireland programme were wide-ranging a number of themes emerged. These included, accessibility, inclusion and awareness.

In terms of projects there was a lot of energy around heritage and historical projects and making more use of local resources in the county, particularly the waterways

**Q1. What are the opportunities of the Creative Ireland programme for Laois?**

**Accessibility.** There is a need to make creativity more accessible. The poem read by Stephen James Smith at the opening of the consultation meeting was cited as an example of accessible creativity.

Fostering creativity is essential and embedding it into the daily life of the county is vital, this will be achieved through projects and initiatives that make creativity accessible to as many people as possible and putting people in touch with their own creativity.

There is a need to make creativity relevant at every level and for all ages, it is for everyone. It is a vital element in improving the well-being of individuals and the community in general. In this regard there needs to be a long-term view as well as shorter-term programmes.

**Inclusion:** Thereare many factors that lead to people feeling excluded from creative activity. These can include age, ability, gender, nationality, locality, employment status and more. The selection and design of events that will foster and encourage inclusive creativity is vital.

Scheduling and timetabling are often key to including as wide a range of people as possible. In the consultation it was made clear that events held during the daytime, are more suitable for older people and events in the early evening for school-going children. Evening initiatives obviously suit most people working outside the home. Summer can be a crucial time for making connections with teenagers and so these times are ideal for an outreach programme making art and music more accessible for young people.

There needs to be a focus and a commitment to working with people in the disability sector and designing events that are inclusive of people with a range of abilities and disabilities.

There also needs to be activities that reflect the growing cultural diversity of the county. Projects should include migrants showing a commitment to them, and a commitment to include people whose primary language is not English. Projects that encourage the use of Irish should be supported.

**Heritage History and Local Resources**

There are significant opportunities for the Creative Ireland programme in Laois in the areas of history, heritage and local resources while combining these with tourism.

The waterways in the county provide great opportunities for the Creative Ireland programme in the areas of tourism, recreation, fishing, education on the flora and fauna and water sports. There is much scope to creatively explore the impact of the waterways on our history and the heritage they have created in terms of mills, bridges and the like.

The historical sites in the county provide an opportunity for the Creative Ireland programme. The Rock of Dunamaise could be central to this and it needs to be highlighted, down to the obvious proposal to floodlight it.

A core part of the heritage in the midlands is the monastic heritage and the Creative Ireland Programme for Laois could build on the theme of ‘The Monastic Midlands.’

Other heritage projects could include an historical review encompassing a history of the big houses in the area, the GAA and its heritage. A commemoration of WW1 in song, dance music and story would be a worthwhile project.

All sporting organisations in the country have a wealth of achievements on the world, national and local arenas. That needs to be documented and promoted.

To engage a broad range of interests an intergenerational film could be produced, this could include migrants and members of the new communities. There is a clear need to include people from the disability sector.

Creative Ireland can have a role to play in job creation, community building and community networking.

**Awareness:** There is need to build an awareness of what the Creative Ireland programme is doing in the county. Information is key but very often it is not forthcoming. More use should be made of parish newsletters, local radio and local press to publicise creative events. The Creative Ireland programme (and its website) could be the ‘go-to’ place for information on creativity and the arts. More awareness of funding is needed

**Creative Ireland**

**Q2. What are the risks and what are the solutions to those risks**

**Accessibility**

The major risk in the eyes of many is that the larger institutions will continue to get all the funding for the arts with little artistic funding for smaller organisations. There needs to be a fairer distribution of funding.

There is too much of a focus on Portlaoise and its environs, there is a risk that other areas will feel left out. There is a need to take events to spaces around Laois – a ceili in the Slieve Blooms was mentioned

**Inclusion**

Meetings like this are at risk of constantly preaching only to the converted; there is a need to get the word out further. There is a risk that people might not be aware that plans and ideas they come up with can be supported by funding or can engage the involvement of others. The Creative Ireland programme needs to focus constantly on being inclusive.

The risk of one body taking over everything and this body not being sufficiently resourced is a real risk. The solution is proper planning, proper resourcing and community involvement.

Timing of activities can exclude people: evening activities suit working people, daytime events may suit older people and homemakers while early evening and weekend events might suit school-going children. Good timing will ensure inclusion there is a risk that bad timing will exclude

**Awareness**

Poor information and a lack of awareness can lead to poor participation. The Creative Ireland programme could alleviate the risk by making people aware of funding and creating events like this (PPN consultation event) that provide more opportunities for networking where people will get support.

Establishing a strong and active presence on social media will keep people informed and aware. A comprehensive programme of events with a specific website is essential accompanied by a social media forum with a rolling blog about what is occurring.

**Other risks**

* No future-proofing of chosen projects, will they survive and thrive?
* There is a risk of spreading resources too thinly and being caught up in, and hindered by local politics.
* Time is a risk; people with not enough time to get involved.
* Failure to recognise the talents and achievements of the citizens of the county and this risk could be somewhat mitigated by the recognition of the voluntary work done by people to bring talent to the fore.
* Bureaucracy and red tape are great risks and barriers to community participation
* An accurate knowledge base needs to be established and a common sense approach.

**Creative Ireland**

**Q3. What specific projects would you like to see come out of the project**

**Accessibility & Inclusion**

There was much interest in combining the arts and creative activity with physical activity such as walking and cycling. In this regard there might be an opportunity to link in with and support the Derryounce cycle-ways in Laois and Offaly in conjunction with Portarlington Community Development Association. This could in turn model the creation of a cycleway on the railway line to Kilkenny

The Laois Walking Festival held in July is an ideal opportunity for a synergy with other activities with a menu of creative events being organised around it.

Using the waterways in Laois was again mentioned as providing possibilities for a range of activities and festivals such as a harvest festival. Such festivals could include raft-races using home-built rafts, walks, water-polo and could involve a broad age range. There are opportunities to organise lots of creative activities on the waterways such as Art on the River. These could be used as pressure points to improve the river walkways.

**Heritage History and Local Resources**

One of the possible flagship projects to be suggested at the workshop was a project called ‘The Monastic Midlands.’ Laois Offaly, Westmeath and North Tipperary have a wealth of monastic settlements that could be linked and created into a single experience encompassing history, spirituality, architecture, social history and the natural environment. These could incorporate activities such as pilgrimages, cycles and walks with audiovisual aids. Work to develop the Monastic Midlands could be undertaken with the relevant local authorities, communities and agencies.

In Laois there should be a focus on the Rock of Dunamaise, making people aware of it locally and nationally and perhaps floodlighting it.

To exploit the tourism value it should be possible to sell five-day packages for Laois Tourism with accommodation using the walking trails and waterways and providing guided trips to all places of interest

A specific project could be built around opportunities to learn Irish, especially for other nationalities.

It was proposed that the pollinator project should be continued and could be expanded to introduce children to such things as beekeeping. For instance, a hive or hives could be developed with glass openings so that it is possible to see the bees at work. This would give children an incentive to plant flowers and shrubs to help the bees to prosper.

It was also suggested that, akin to the work of the Folklore Commission in the 1930s, a project could be developed getting primary school students to record the history of their area and record their grandparents’ life experiences.

This could be coupled with an audio-visual project to document local unique issues, places of interest and historic happenings through poetry, storytelling and music all done in local accents. Open-house storytelling could be a useful platform on which to build this.

**The Arts and the People**

Sculptors, artists and gardeners enhance our public areas; a programme and a plan to encourage work by the like of these artists/craftmakers needs to be developed.

There is a need for literary events with a focus on the reader rather than the writer, encouraging people to read and appreciate literature in an accessible way. Very often literature is explored and discussed in ways that are exclusive, highbrow and off-putting.

Establish a structure to support writers and those wishing to publish in Laois. Promote song, music and drama opportunities where adults can develop their ‘hidden skills. Provide ‘maker space’ for craftspeople in libraries.

**Other suggested projects**

* Establish a Youth Circus.
* Promote winter activities for communities to become involved in creative projects
* A talent show to bring out talent.
* Develop an international folk dance festival
* Well-being festival
* Promote the inclusion of local performers on the Electric Picnic programme, it should be a showcase of Laois artists and artistic endeavour.
* Promote smaller group activity
* Clowns without borders
* PE in all schools
* Visiting the elderly with dogs

#### Laois PPN / Creative Ireland Workshop 2

#### The Arts Office

#### Q1.  Which services do you think are the strong points of the Laois Arts Service?

#### There was a clear consensus that the strong points of the Laois Arts Service are centred around the work of the Arts Office, the Dunamaise Arts Centre, Laois Music Generation, the Laois School of Music, Culture Night, the Artist in Residence programme, the Artist in Schools programme, the Art House in Stradbally and Comhaltas.

#### It was felt that there is a wide range of activities covering the arts in the county, that the facilities are good and there are a lot of opportunities to get involved.

#### Q2. Where do you see gaps in the current service provision?

#### The main gaps identified are gaps in information, communication, dispersal of events and funding and promotion.

#### There is a strong sense that the activities and events are too Portlaoise-centric and there is a need to spread them out around the county and into other communities. There were suggestions that there should be more theatre in local halls, storytelling in the schools, history tours through the villages. In this regard the Durrow Cycling Heritage trail was a huge success. “Keep the arts programme local, awaken the locals communities to the arts.”

#### There is an information deficit in that some perceive and experience the arts as the preserve a ‘closed group’ and people feel disenfranchised and disillusioned.”

#### There was a suggestion that the PPN might take a role in the information flow around the arts and the Dunamaise Arts Centre could be used as a central information point for the provision and the dissemination of information.

#### There was a feeling that communication is a big gap in the service provision and even at this (PPN Consultation) event too much time was spent on presentation and not enough on discussion and feedback.

#### More co-ordination and networking were called for and it was suggested that a one-stop-shop website or an e-zine be established to outline and promote the wide range of arts activities like music lessons (public and private), art, theatre, music events etc. It was felt that on-line advertising isn’t enough, it should be promoted during and after gigs and events, “If you enjoyed this tell a friend. There is also something like this happening at….”

#### Some expressed concern that there is a lack of opportunity in the arts for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. The arts in the county could benefit hugely from their involvement.

#### There was a suggestion that regular and established arts events be used to promote and compliment new and perhaps less mainstream projects and events.

#### There needs to be an aggressive approach taken to the promotion of the arts in the schools, particularly the primary schools.

#### There are other gaps in the provision of arts in Laois, jazz being an example.

#### Q3. Please add any other comments/suggestions you consider to be relevant to the arts in County Laois.

#### There needs to be a concerted effort to include those who feel excluded from the arts, making it more accessible for ordinary people who are not regularly exposed to the arts

#### There needs to be widespread promotion of activities, drama art and music and not just the projects in which the arts office is directly involved but prominence must be given to other service providers working with the arts. “Bring arts out to the villages.”

#### More energy and creativity needs to be applied to the promotion of the arts and activities. There needs to be more poetry readings, pop-up lessons perhaps there should be am on-line calendar of events or an App or a Facebook page specifically for culture and the arts, maybe it could be called ‘Culture Box Laois’. Traffic on the app or site could be promoted by incentives such as 10% off tickets booked by those using it.

#### It was also suggested that non-traditional venues could be used for events with pop up poetry lessons/readings and the like.

#### It was proposed that there could be a countywide arts network meeting every two to three months.

**Laois PPN / Creative Ireland Workshop 3**

**Libraries in Laois**

**Q1. How can Laois Library Service improve access to library collections and services to maintain or improve library usage and promote reading and literacy in the community?**

There was strong opinion in the feedback that young people need to be encouraged to explore what the Library Service has to offer. Summer reading programmes with rewards and competitions might be a way to keep them engaged.

One contributor described how during the summer, as a young person he/she was part of a book club that prepared short book reports for the librarian on the books they read with a chart and stickers to show their progress through an agreed booklist. There was a contest for reading in terms of quality and quantity and the names of the winners were published in the local paper. This could be done nowadays using social media to publicise and engage young people in the challenge and to publicise the results.

These summer reading challenges could be revived along with visits to the libraries by secondary schools. A mobile service to schools was proposed, perhaps once a month, and perhaps it might also be available to the wider community on that day. There is a need for more study spaces and toilets in the branches.

People with dyslexia and other disabilities must be kept in mind with regard to technology and reading materials in the branches.

Concerns were expressed that the opening hours are somewhat restrictive and it was suggested that a drop-off service could be useful to circumvent that problem.

Concern was also expressed that parking might be restrictive at the proposed new library on Main St, Portlaoise.

**Q2. Public libraries are a critical cultural space showcasing, curating and conserving our diverse heritage and providing opportunities for creative expression. How can Laois County Libraries continue to enable creativity in every community?**

The library service should avoid allowing the branches become ‘staff-less libraries.’ This development would be problematic since the personal touch is a core part of the library service.

Libraries should be multi-cultural spaces with books and materials from other countries, especially countries from which many of our new citizens and applicant citizens came. Children in Ireland who came here from these countries or whose parents came from these countries would benefit if they could access materials, books and information on their cultural heritage.

The branches should have an adaptable space that would change frequently. It could be an exhibition space, a performance space for the presentation of local drama or historical reconstructions of events from history.

**Q3. What services can your local Laois Library develop to support local heritage and communities and help to build community cohesion and identity?**

The branches could provide space for adult book clubs and spaces where people could gather to discuss the daily newspapers over a cup of tea. There could also be an adult summer reading challenge to encourage people to read and which could act as an introduction to literature. Adult chess was also suggested.

The library could be used as a forum for gathering local folklore where older people are encouraged to share their memories of growing up. These memories could be recorded as YouTube clips.

**Laois PPN / Creative Ireland Workshop 4**

**Recreation/Play/Sports**

**Q1. What additional new or improved play, recreation and sports facilities would you like to see provided by Laois County Council (LCC) over the next 5 years?**

The major suggestion across the board arising from the sports element of the consultation workshop was the need to establish common membership and a common ‘smart card’ giving access to all the public sports facilities across the county including the sports centres. These should be brought under central management and a commitment is needed to ensure the development of a sports hall at Portlaoise Leisure Centre.

The common membership for all branch libraries was quoted as an example of how the suggested smart card might work and indeed the same card could be used for access to arts, heritage and tourism facilities with a discount for events that have admission fees.

There was a specific call for a sports hall that provides basketball facilities suitable for able bodied people and people with disabilities. This needs to be put into a time frame and not moved from annual plan to annual plan.

Walks took up much of the discussion. There were calls for expansion of the walking network across the county to include river walks, access to lands and improvement of the underfoot quality of the pathways along with the need for improved signage. The possibility of extending the boardwalk on Slieve Bloom was particularly mentioned. The tartan track in Portlaoise was also highlighted.

There was a suggestion that the Sports Activity Hubs should be extended to all rural areas and especially targeted at the least active sectors of the population, particularly those between 30 and 80 years of age and teenage girls. The hub, as it has developed in Stradbally, Vicarstown and Timahoe has seen an increase not just in physical activity but also in the use of rural infrastructure such as pitches, halls, playgrounds and school facilities.

Public parks and playgrounds provided by Laois County Council need to have constant maintenance and caretaking in place with the provision of proper lighting in these areas.

*(‘Bridge Centre – huge community benefits for all ages.’ This comment was included in the feedback; the facilitator was not sure what it means.)*

**Q2. What assistance should Laois County Council’s Sports and Leisure Section provide to community groups and clubs in Co Laois?**

Subject to certain criteria Laois County Council should assist in the acquisition of facilities for field sports. To qualify for assistance clubs would need to be established for a certain length of time and have substantial membership. The current facilities should be used frequently and the clubs should have a good financial record and funding base.

Assistance should be given to groups and associations to source funding. The LCC could provide workshops for them around grant-aid, fund-raising and funding in general. Groups also need advice and support on insurance and insurance provision and LCC could help in developing a common policy for a range of activities including walks.

Schools should be encouraged to open up their facilities such as halls, pitches and playing areas to the local community after school times. LCC could act as honest broker in this and could help with the provision of insurance cover and give grant assistance to the schools for upkeep and improvement as a quid-pro-quo.

Laois needs a cycle trail with hostels and accommodation and a suggestion was already made to open the Laois Kilkenny rail-line as a cycle way.

Laois has huge river fishing potential especially in the Mountmellick area. It is an activity for all ages and all abilities. LCC could help with developing fishing and in particular the Owenass River Walk Project could benefit from council assistance.

**Q3. How can Laois County Council help to encourage more people to be more active in the county, thereby making Laois a healthier lace to live, work and visit?**

The development of a single membership and a smart card for all community leisure facilities/sports complexes in Laois was reiterated here. This could lead to more awareness of what is available and greater use of what is there.

Also reiterated was the need to improve physically the walkways and pathways by improving the under foot conditions and keeping the hedgerows tidied. Better lighting is also needed for walks located in towns and villages and used at night or early in the morning.

The Walking Ireland strategy, *Walking 2017-2022* needs to be promoted in the county, this could be done through social media. Regarding the ‘looped walks’, are they registered with Sport Ireland?

The Slí na Sláinte walks need to be revisited, improved and made safe with river walks in the towns made more accessible, safer and better maintained.

Cycling needs support and encouragement with the suggested development of cycle paths along the old Kilkenny railway line and along the canal between Kildare and Laois. The Cycle-to-Work scheme also needs to be promoted and supported.

The information flow and the updating of information on sports and leisure needs to be streamlined with a suggestion that a club email system should be developed that can be easily accessed giving members the facility to update their information.

In terms of encouraging more people to be more active in the county making Laois a healthier place to live, there was a suggestion that the role, functions and track record of the Laois Sports Partnership need to be emphasised and recognised.