

Dear Sir/Madam.

I write to you regarding the National Planning Framework, with regard to current economic and social trends in County Laois and in the town of Portlaoise in particular.

Portlaoise is currently the largest town in the Midlands region, with a larger population than Athlone, Tullamore, Naas and Mullingar. According to the most recent census, this population growth is most acute in the county town of Portlaoise, where the population has grown by almost 10% since 2011, further to the 60% population increase which the town experienced between 2002 and 2011.

This has put significant pressure on a wide range of services in Portlaoise. Over the last decade, thousands of houses have been built in County Laois, which are now occupied by thousands of people. However it is apparent that the level of public services, availability of local jobs and investment in Laois and Portlaoise in particular, has not kept pace to match this huge population increase.

- 24/7 Accident and Emergency services and the maternity unit are under threat of closure in Portlaoise hospital.
- Youth services in Laois currently receive an allocation of €6.05 per child, compared to €235.71 in other counties and cities.
- There has been a reduction in the funding allocated to the Portlaoise Family Resource centre (TUSLA) over the last 3 years.
- County Laois has no third level institution, although the county has an above the national average amount of young people.
- There are 2 direct provision centres within 15 miles of Portlaoise occupied by hundreds of people, which have the effect of putting more pressure on a range of services in the town.
- No HSE GP primary care centre in Portlaoise.
- Laois ranks as the lowest county in the country for both IDA and Enterprise Ireland jobs per 10,000 people, according to IBEC.
- According to the CSO, over 10,000 people commute from Laois to Dublin on a daily basis.
- Laois ranks as 22nd lowest out of 24 counties for tourism.

This rapid population growth particularly in the towns of Portlaoise, Mountmellick and Portarlington has created many challenges for public services and social integration locally in County Laois.

Some practical examples as a consequence of very bad planning in Portlaoise are that you can no longer buy a litre of milk or a newspaper on Main Street in Portlaoise and there are many newcomers to Portlaoise, some of whom have been living in the

town for 10 years or more and who have never been on the Main Street. A complete housing estate, Hepburn Court which is situated less than a mile from the town centre was made uninhabitable and burnt out by vandals and criminals. There are a number of housing estates in Portlaoise suffering from considerable disadvantage and high rates of unemployment.

As Laois County Council have highlighted in their submission, Portlaoise lies within a 60 minute "Zone of influence" from Dublin City, Limerick City, Waterford City, the town of Portlaoise should be given a designation reflective of the "Inland Port" but renamed "Prime Urban Centre", with appropriate infrastructure such as broadband, increased rail services and an enhanced road network to be provided.

The current National Spatial Strategy was devised in 2002 and the town of Portlaoise was at that time not identified as a regional gateway or hub in terms of business, residential, service or amenity functions. However, as the population of Portlaoise has more than doubled since 2002, it is my opinion that the strategic position of the town should be reconsidered in the context of the overall National Spatial Strategy.

I would be grateful if all of these points could be taken into account in the context of the National Planning Framework process and if a blueprint for the future of County Laois and Portlaoise could be developed that would ensure that future development in terms of infrastructure, public services, planning and social integration proceed in an orderly and balanced way.

Kind Regards,



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Minister for Justice and Equality

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