



Longford County Council Scrutiny Report

NOAC Report No. 60 – October 2023



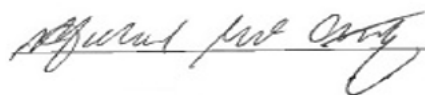
Chair's Opening remarks

The Local Government Reform Act 2014 introduced significant changes to a wide range of aspects of the local government system, including in relation to matters of accountability and oversight. In that regard, the Act provided for the establishment of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) as the statutory body overseeing the local government sector. NOAC was established in July 2014 under the 2014 Act to provide independent oversight of the local government sector. NOAC's functions are wide ranging, involving the scrutiny of performance generally and financial performance specifically, supporting best practice, overseeing implementation of national local government policy and monitoring and evaluating implementation of corporate plans, adherence to service level agreements and public service reform by local government bodies.

Since I became Chair of NOAC in September 2018, I have continued the good work that had been started by the previous NOAC Chair in meeting with the Chief Executives of the local authorities and their Management teams. As outlined below, this process has evolved over time and continues to evolve.

The preparation of the profile report also identifies the performance of local authorities in relevant NOAC reports and provides for further examination of the results of these reports. The Scrutiny Process requires time and resources from NOAC and the local authorities in preparation of the profile report and for the Stage 1 and Stage 2 meetings. NOAC considers to date that the investment of time and resources has been worthwhile and necessary.

I have been struck by the welcome and sharing of information that has taken place at the meetings. It has provided an opportunity to learn, to listen to how the particular local authority operates, the challenges they face, the plans and ideas that have been developed and gives an opportunity to reflect on what is working well and areas that need to be addressed. It has identified areas of good practice and many of these ideas have been showcased at the NOAC Good Practice Seminars over the years. I look forward to continuing to work closely and collaboratively with all the local authorities and want to use this opportunity to thank all the Chief Executives and their teams for the time and courtesy and welcome extended to NOAC in this process.



Michael McCarthy, Chair
13th October 2023

Background to Profiles and Scrutiny Programme

In February 2017, NOAC, in accordance with its statutory functions, began to review the performance of individual local authorities. The starting point was getting an overall picture derived from the performance indicator report results, the Local Government Audit Service (LGAS) audit reports, the financial position and revenue collection performance. Information on private rented sector inspections, housing stock management and maintenance data and Customer Satisfaction was all considered by using the relevant data contained in the NOAC reports published to date.

At the outset, the importance of the meetings was emphasised over and above the data which NOAC had regarding local authorities. There was also an objective to broaden the NOAC members' understanding of the work of the local authorities and the individual priorities and pressures they faced and to put the information in context. Therefore, NOAC wanted to get the background perspective from the authorities and any other datasets that the Councils consider should be taken into account. Significant work is required to bring this part together and the work of the NOAC Secretariat and the local authority NOAC Coordinators must be acknowledged.

Following an initial face to face meeting, which is called a Stage 1 meeting, local authorities were invited to a Stage 2 meeting where more detailed questions would be carried out in the areas of interest to NOAC, including customer service and IT investment, collection rates, the quality of information provision to the public, etc. These meetings would take place after or latterly before the main NOAC board meeting with all the board members present.

The purpose

The process gives NOAC the opportunity to have oversight of all the local authorities and considers the factors that facilitates them in performing well, along with the barriers that may exist relevant to the individual local authority. The meetings enable the local authorities to outline their strong and weak performing areas. It allows for further examination of the results of the performance indicators and shows the results in context. It must be emphasised that these meetings differ from the Performance Indicator (PI) Validation meetings which are carried out by the Performance Indicator Working Group to interrogate the results reported in relation to selected performance indicators. These meetings, while very informative, are specific to the performance indicator process and do not consider other areas of performance that NOAC have oversight of, including Customer Service, Internal Audit, Corporate Plans, etc.

During the meeting NOAC can see areas where consistent under-performance is highlighted and which can be examined further. It also allows for exemplars of best practice to be identified and used to share with other local authorities. The process as outlined, is not a follow up to the PI reports, but does enable consideration of issues that may warrant further clarification or investigation in the PI process. Local authorities have all indicated in the meetings thus far that they compare their performance and results in relation to what they deem as similar local authorities. This grouping could be reviewed further by NOAC and adopted for the results of some of its reports. Groupings are not only on size but, on levels of finances, urban and rural, staff numbers and other factors.

The Scrutiny Process

The process has evolved over time, allowing it to become more structured, formal and documented. Given the importance of the work, it is led by the Chair of NOAC (or a delegated alternate, if required) with support from NOAC members and the Executive. The formal process agreed by the Board is termed as a constructive dialogue and is laid out below.

1

Stage 1 (NOAC Scrutiny Visit)

Meeting held with NOAC Chair (or alternate) and/or one additional NOAC member and member(s) of the NOAC Executive. The Chief Executive and members of the management team, as invited by the Chief Executive shall attend.

- Stage 1 notice issued to Chief Executive of the local authority.
- Profile report prepared by NOAC Executive with input from the local authority. This is circulated along with an agenda to the local authority and NOAC attendees in advance of the visit. The report is based on general and specific information from NOAC reports relating to the local authority in question.
- Local authority to present on issues arising and take questions from attending NOAC members.
- Meeting minutes prepared and issued for comment.

2

Stage 2 (NOAC Scrutiny Meeting)

Appearance at full NOAC meeting. The Chief Executive and members of the management team, as invited by the Chief Executive shall attend.

- Stage 2 notice to attend NOAC meeting issued to Chief Executive of local authority.
- Profile report updated as required and circulated along with an agenda to local authority and NOAC members in advance of the meeting.
- Local authority to present on issues arising and take questions from the NOAC board.
- Meeting minutes prepared for circulation to local authority for its comment.

3

Stage 3 (NOAC Sign off and Publication)

Following completion of Stages 1 and 2 the Executive shall collate the material and present it to the NOAC Board as follows:

- Final sign off on minutes / documents / reports.
- Comments / Findings / Recommendations to be made as required.
- Approval for completed records to be published.

Progress to date

2017

To commence the process, profiles were prepared in respect of Cork City Council, Louth and Offaly County Councils and these were forwarded to the Chief Executives of the authorities concerned. The then NOAC Chair, Pat McLoughlin, began this process with a meeting with the Chief Executive of Louth County Council for a general discussion on the profile in August 2017. This Stage 1 meeting was followed by a similar meeting with the Chief Executive of Cork City Council in September 2017. The final Stage 1 meeting to take place in 2017 was held with the Chief Executive of Offaly County Council in October 2017. In December 2017, Louth County Council attended a meeting with NOAC after the main NOAC Board meeting. This was the first Stage 2 meeting, which formed an important part of the overall process. These meetings served a particularly important function which allowed the Council to give an overview of their work and also gave an opportunity to the NOAC Board to put questions to the Council and understand their situation in more depth.

2018

In 2018, the schedule consisted of eight meetings with local authorities, four each for Stage 1 and Stage 2. A Stage 2 meeting was held with Offaly County Council in January 2018. This was followed by another Stage 2 meeting with Cork City Council in March 2018.

A new Chair, Michael McCarthy, was appointed on 24 September 2018. The process continued with Westmeath County Council in October 2018 and Kerry County Council in December 2018. These were Stage 2 meetings with the NOAC board as in these cases, the 2018 Performance Indicator validation meetings for these authorities were deemed sufficient as Stage 1 meetings. Further Stage 1 meetings were held with Roscommon County Council and Tipperary County Council.

2019

The format continued with 8 meetings with local authorities during the year. Five Stage 1 meetings and three Stage 2 meetings. The Stage 1 meetings were with Donegal County Council, Laois County Council, Clare County Council, Waterford City and County Council and Carlow County Council. Stage 2 meetings took place with Roscommon County Council, Tipperary County Council and Donegal County Council.

2020

A meetings list was scheduled for 2020 to cover 6 additional local authorities. The year commenced with a Stage 1 meeting with Monaghan County Council in February, along with two Stage 2 meetings with Laois County Council and Waterford City and County Council. Further meetings were scheduled for April, however, due to the COVID crisis these meetings were deferred.

The COVID restrictions presented challenges to the meetings but it was decided to continue the Stage 2 meetings virtually and meetings were held with Clare, Monaghan, Waterford City and County, Carlow and Sligo. These were carried out via the WebEx platform.

A socially distanced Stage 1 meeting was held in person with Limerick City and County Council in August and with Sligo County Council in September 2020.

2021

COVID had a significant impact on local authorities, and in particular, for NOAC on the Scrutiny process. The Stage 1 meetings were all held in person, but restrictions curtailed their activities in 2021. Stage 1 meetings were held with Meath and South Dublin in July 2021 and Fingal in October 2021. The Stage 2 meetings progressed, as these were capable of being held remotely, with one held in January 2021 with Limerick City and County Council, another with Meath in September 2021 and a further meeting with South Dublin in December 2021.

2022

2022 saw an increase in the number of scrutiny meetings held with local authorities. Stage 1 meetings were held with Galway City Council in March 2022, with Cavan and Leitrim County Councils and Dublin City Council in June 2022. Further Stage 1 meetings took place later in the year, with Wexford and Galway County Councils, in September 2022. Several stage two meetings were also progressed, with Wexford and Leitrim County Councils and Galway City Council, in October 2022.

Future meetings and reports

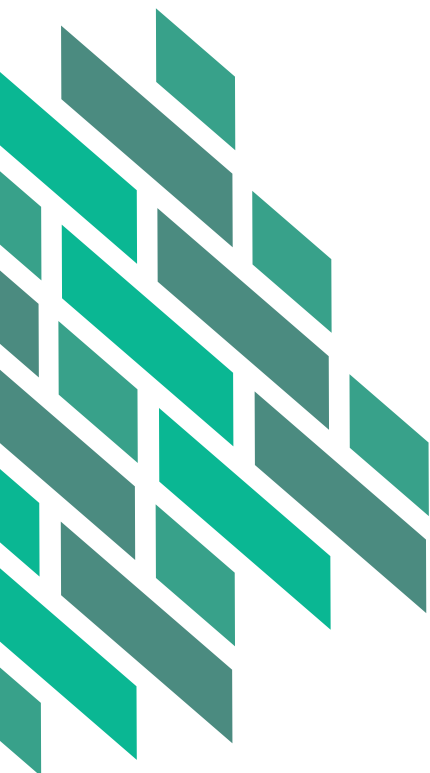
This report outlines the purpose and the procedures of such reports and, while the process may continue to evolve, it is not currently expected to produce another master report, similar to the master report produced in [May 2021](#). It is intended that once all stages in the scrutiny process have been completed with the relevant other local authorities that the report would be published on that basis and would form part of the suite of reports under the umbrella of the Scrutiny Report Process. It is anticipated that progress will continue to be made with further Stage 1 and Stage 2 meetings so that each local authority will have participated in the process. It must be outlined that significant changes and delays have been experienced due to the restrictions imposed by COVID in 2020 and 2021. In 2022 and as noted above, 3 Stage 2 and 6 Stage 1 meetings were held with Scrutiny reports being prepared for the completed Stage 2 meetings. So far, in 2023, there have been six Stage 1 and four Stage 2 meetings held.

Conclusion

The process thus far allowed for the NOAC Chair and members to get a greater understanding and insight into the challenges that face each of the local authorities. Also, issues such as collection rates, staff numbers, inspection rates, finances that are included in reports in some cases benefit from the explanation and discussion as to the reason behind these figures. The meetings also enabled NOAC to see the various priorities that each local authority considered relevant to their citizens and how they overcame various challenges and how they work collaboratively with other local authorities, state bodies and stakeholders. Areas of Good Practice have been identified along the way and these have contributed to presentations of these projects at the NOAC Good Practice Seminars in 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022.

Longford County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in February 2023 and their Stage 2 meeting in June 2023. It is important to note that the material in this report is reflective of the position at that time. Therefore, any changes to the profile from later NOAC reports are not included in this report. In addition, it should be noted that the relevant information from Performance Indicator Report 2021 is included in this report, as is information from the Review of Local Authority and Regional Assembly Corporate Plans 2019–2024. The NOAC highlights the following points arising out of these meetings with Longford County Council:

- NOAC was keen to learn that with regards to libraries, Longford is installing My Open libraries which allows for a self-service library, with broadband facilities also having been rolled out to a number of libraries.
- NOAC viewed it as positive that the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund has been set up, while noting the associated challenges, such as the necessity to provide match funding for schemes, along with a lack of contractors and consultants, which creates time delays in the system.
- NOAC was pleased to hear that housing loans are receiving a renewed focus, with a significant increase in 2022 on the 2021 collection rates.



Longford County Council Scrutiny Process

1. Longford County Council Profile	7
2. Stage 1 meeting February 2023 – Minutes	20
3. Stage 2 meeting June 2023 – Minutes	24
4. Stage 2 – Presentation	29



NOAC Profile Longford County Council

January 2023

Contents

General Information	8
Staffing	8
Budget	8
Housing Information	8
Council Mission Statement	8
Economic Forum (CEF)	9
The Local Enterprise Office	9
Retail Incentives	9
The Corporate Plan	10
Shared services	10
Regional Issues including new developments and initiatives	10
Supporting Strategies	10
Any other relevant information	10
Collection Rates	10
NOAC Reports overview	11
NOAC Report Nos 46 - Review of Local Authority and Regional Assembly	11
Corporate Plans 2019-2024 - November 2021	11
NOAC Reports Nos 50 and 44 - Performance Indicator Report 2021 - November 2022 and 2020 - September 2021	12
NOAC Report No 24 - Customer Satisfaction Survey - September 2020	13
NOAC Report No 17 - Internal Audit in Local Authorities - July 2018	13
NOAC Report 10 - A Review of Local Authority Performance of Private Rented Houses Regulations Functions October 2016	13
NOAC Report No 51 - Public Spending Code 2021	14
Performance Indicator tables 2014-2018	16

Longford County Council General Information

Local authority	Longford County Council
Population:	46,634 (2022 Preliminary Census)
Area:	1,091 Km ²
Municipal Districts:	3
2023 Budget	€64,448,368
Number employed @ 31/12/2022	409
WTE Staff per 1,000 population	129
% of paid working days lost to medically certified sick leave	3.02%
Housing Information @ 31/12/22	
Local Authority Stock number	2,205
Number currently on waiting list	730
HAP Tenancies	342
Homeless presentations	151 during 2022 (93.5% increase over the last 2 years)
Any specific housing issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Severe lack of private rental properties and the increase in rental costs is severely impacting applicants ability to avail of HAP/Homeless HAP. ■ Significant increase in homeless presentations, resulting in shortage of emergency accommodation beds and subsequent difficulty in moving on those who avail of emergency accommodation. This is also placing pressure on staff to manage the volume of presentations currently being dealt with. ■ Lack of contractors and increased costs is proving challenging in completing repairs to properties in order to re-let as soon as possible. Void funding of €11K per property is not sufficient in many cases to bring the property to letting standard. ■ Significant increase in demand for both private and DPG grants, this is creating pressures on our resources and mostly the same contractors are completing works who we are also relying on for pre-letting repairs and maintenance calls. ■ Our housing stock is steadily increasing year on year, (11.64% increase over the past 4 years), this is creating challenges in a number of areas, such as Maintenance, Tenant Liaison and Estate Management.
Short Information Paragraph	
Council Mission Statement	Our mission is to work with our communities and partners to develop Longford as a dynamic, vibrant, safe and prosperous county, celebrating its diversity, culture and heritage and, through strong leadership, build safe, healthy and sustainable communities.

<p>Economic Forum (CEF)</p>	<p>Whilst there is no specific Economic Forum in LCC, the Placemaking Strategic Policy Committee incorporates membership from Councillors representing each of the political groups on LCC with further presentation from the business, educational, tourism and voluntary / community sectors. It is supported by the executive of the Community, Economic, Enterprise and Tourism Development Directorates of the Council. The Council is also involved in supporting or leading on the delivery of the following strategies and plans for Longford county:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan ■ Longford Digital Strategy ■ Local Economic and Community Plan 2016 – 2021 ■ County Longford Tourism Strategy 2016 - 2022 ■ The executive works closely with IDA and EI to promote county Longford as a strategic location for inward investment.
<p>The Local Enterprise Office</p>	<p>The mission of the Local Enterprise Office Longford is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Promote and develop an enterprise culture and to provide business support services at a local level ■ To facilitate the development of new and existing micro - enterprises ■ To increase employment in micro - enterprises ■ To maximise the competitiveness of micro - enterprises within County Longford <p>It does this through providing a range of supports to start or grow business in Longford including financial and grant aid, training programmes, mentoring supports, and networking events. The LEO office works in partnership with other agencies and services to business designing programmes to address the needs of the business community.</p>
<p>Retail Incentives</p>	<p>The LEO office is involved in the administration of a Shop Front Scheme to encourage retailers to enhance the front of properties (Maximum assistance €700) per unit.</p> <p>It is also involved in the Business Incentive Scheme that provides incentive to businesses to occupy vacant or commercial/industrial units. While the scheme is still open the level of application has slowed dramatically since 2021.</p> <p>Incentive under the scheme</p> <p>75% rebate linked to value of rates on property - year 1</p> <p>50% - year 2</p> <p>25% - year 3</p> <p>Working in partnership with the local Chamber of Commerce, LEO, Longford delivers a shop local campaign on an ongoing basis with a significant focus on the winter season.</p> <p>Specialists training specific to retailers along with one-to-one consultancy with retail experts is available on an application basis. LEO services also include sector specific LEAN programmes and access to funding for digitalisation and green initiatives.</p>

The Corporate Plan	This Corporate Plan 2019-2024 was developed and adopted by Longford County Council. The Corporate plan is available online at. https://www.longfordcoco.ie/your-council/publications/corporate-plan/corporate-plan-2019-2024-.pdf
Shared services	N/A
Regional Issues including new developments and initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Regional Enterprise Plan ■ Just Transition ■ N4 ■ Climate Action ■ Hidden Heartlands
Supporting Strategies	Please see our Corporate Plan for details of our Supporting Strategies. https://www.longfordcoco.ie/your-council/publications/corporate-plan/corporate-plan-2019-2024-.pdf#page=27
Any other relevant information	None provided by local authority

Collection Rates

	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Rate collection rates	84%	81%	88%	89%	89%	84%	82%	69.7%
Rent collection rates	90%	89%	90%	93%	92%	90%	88%	86.2%
Housing loan collection rates	69%	65%	59%	55%	60%	57%	55%	56%

From records, it is clear that there has been a steady increase in rate collections over the years to 2019, before falling back. The rate collections were 69.7% in 2014 and hit a high of 88% in 2019, and currently stand at 84% in 2021, which is very similar to the national average of 83.4%.

Rent collections have increased slightly over the years, going from 86.2% in 2014 to 90% in 2021. This is just above the national average of 88.8% for 2021.

Housing loans collection rates have improved significantly since 2014, when it was at 56% and now stands at over 69%, though this is far below the average collection rate of 81.6% for 2021.

NOAC Reports Overview

NOAC was established in July 2014 as an independent statutory body to provide oversight of the local government sector in Ireland. NOAC's functions are wide ranging, involving the scrutiny of performance generally and financial performance specifically. NOAC also supports best practice, oversees the implementation of national local government policy, monitors and evaluates implementation of corporate plans, adherence to service level agreements and public service reform by local government bodies.

The annual Performance Indicator Report published by NOAC is one of its key reports every year. NOAC has the function of scrutinising local authority performance against relevant indicators. NOAC believes that monitoring performance over time and against comparable authorities has the potential to encourage continuous improvement in local authority service provision. From the reports published to date matters relevant to Longford County Council are outlined in the points below.

NOAC REPORT NO 46

Review of Local Authority and Regional Assembly

Corporate Plans 2019–2024 – November 2021

In November 2021, NOAC published its review of the corporate plans of local authorities and regional assemblies for the period 2019 - 2024. The purpose of the report is to review the adequacy of the plans and to assist with the further development of good practice in corporate planning. In the report, examples of good practice in relation to both the process of developing the plans, and the content of the plans are highlighted.

Under the process, areas considered for review included:

- The pre-plan consultation, which looks at how local authorities formulated the Corporate Plan, consulted with stakeholders and engaged with elected members.

- Review of the Corporate Plans. This investigated how local authorities proposed to review the progress of their Corporate Plans.
- Integration of the Corporate Plan with other policies and strategies, which examined the extent to which local authorities consulted other policy reports and strategies when devising their Corporate Plans.
- Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty. Under this heading, it was examined as to how local authorities engaged with the issue of human rights.

Examining the contents of the Corporate Plans, the following were among the areas reviewed:

- Vision and Mission: Strategies and Objectives. This detailed local authorities' visions, mission statements and broad goals during the life of the plan. It focused on the setting of actions and goals to deliver these broad objectives and visions.
- Financial resourcing of the Corporate Plan and how risks to the delivery of the Corporate Plan can be examined, taking into account how Councils are dependent on voted capital funds from central government.
- Measuring and mitigating risk. This examines where local authorities depend on other external providers and other public bodies to successfully deliver certain services. This involves risk which can be mitigated through appropriate oversight, including service level agreements.

Longford County Council was alluded to as a small sized Council in the report classifying it similar to counties such as Leitrim, Sligo, Monaghan and Offaly. Longford County Council is also a member of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly which has 42 members and includes Westmeath, Offaly, Laois, Louth, Meath, Kildare, Wicklow, Fingal, Dublin City, South Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown.

Within the report, Longford were not highlighted as standing out as either a low or high performing local authority in any of the areas being reviewed under either process or content. This implies that it had an adequate corporate plan process and content when compared to other local authorities.

NOAC REPORT NOS 50 AND 44

Performance Indicator Reports 2021 and 2020

- Housing.** Longford County Council owned 2,196 social housing dwellings at the end of 2021 with 7.19% vacant, compared to a national average of 3.16%. In 2020 the Council owned 2,112 social housing dwellings with 6.35% vacant, compared to a national average of 3.18%.

In 2021 the average time for rehousing in vacant properties in Longford was 67 weeks, which is almost double the national average of 34.44 weeks. This is a large increase on 2020, when the average time for rehousing in vacant properties in Longford was 48.78 weeks, which was greatly in excess of the national average of 32.69 weeks.

New House building inspections rose from 28.33% in 2014 to 52.03% in 2019, before sharply declining to 3.26% in 2020 and 11.11% in 2021.

Longford had the lowest maintenance cost per unit nationally in 2021 at €273.11, which was a significant decrease on €336.50 in 2020.

- Environment.** 21% of the County is unpolluted or litter-free (38% in 2020). 71% of the area is slightly polluted (47% in 2020) and 7% is moderately polluted (14% in 2020). The national average figures for being unpolluted or litter-free in 2021 was 22% and was 13% for being moderately polluted.
- The % of households availing of the 3 bin service went from 26.95% in 2014 to 22.43% in 2019 and at 70.98% in 2021.
- Green Flag status.** At the end of 2021, 38% of schools in the county held a Green Flag, the same as in 2020. The national average in 2021 was 34.8% and was 41.83% in 2020.
- Fire service.** It took an average of 6:31 minutes to mobilise fire brigades for calls to fires, compared to the 6:03 minutes of 2020.
- Libraries.** There was an average of 1.06 visits per head of population (above the national average of 0.86) and 76,727 items issued to library borrowers in 2021. For 2020 the figures were 2 visits (double the national average of 1.05) and 75,754 items borrowed.

The cost of the library service increased significantly over the years, at €41.10 in 2014 to €55.86 in 2021.

- Roads.** In terms of road condition, Longford performed the best in this area with the highest percentage (38.84%) of its local primary roads being in the best condition with no defects. Additionally, this was also repeated in its local secondary roads having the highest percentage (42.12%) being in the best condition with no defects. Its tertiary roads also had the highest percentage (4.85%) of roads in the best condition with no defects.
 - Cost per capita of the planning service** increased from €37.83 in 2014 to €45.22 in 2021.
 - Staff total.** Whole-time equivalent staff employed by Longford County Council at the end of 2021 was 342.50. This compares to 334.66 for the end of 2020.
 - Overheads.** It was noted that in terms of overheads, which are costs directly related to the operational activities of a local authority, Longford had the highest payroll costs as a percentage of its revenue expenditure at 40.13%.
 - Sick leave.** Longford County's medically certified sick leave rate is 1.67% (compared to 2.56% in 2020), making it one of the local authorities which met the public sector sick leave target of 3.5%. Longford's self-certified sick leave rate was 0.13% in 2021. The national average is 0.19%.
 - Technology & Social media.** The per capita total page views of Longford County's websites in 2021 was 11.38, which compares to an average of 13.6 across all local authorities. The per capita total page views of Longford's websites in 2020 was 16.39, which compares to an average of 15.56 across all local authorities.
- The per capita total number of followers at the end 2021 of its social media accounts was 1.52, as opposed to an average of 0.93 across all local authorities. This compares to the per capita total number of followers at the end 2020 of its social media accounts of 1.18, as opposed to an average of 0.81 across all local authorities.

With regards the cost of Information Communications Technology (ICT) provision per whole-time equivalent staff member of a local authority, Longford recorded the lowest cost (€2,642.33) per whole-time equivalent staff in 2021, down from €3,307.77 in 2020.

- **Public lighting.** Longford reported a billable wattage of 1,805 kilowatts per hour, which compares to 1,997 kilowatts per hour in 2020.
- **Public liability.** In 2021 Longford had a cost of settled claims per capita of €14.90. This compares to €16.00 in 2020.

NOAC REPORT NO 24

Customer Satisfaction Survey September 2020

- In 2018, Ipsos MRBI was commissioned by NOAC to conduct a survey among the general public to establish their satisfaction with their local authority. A face-to-face in-home CAPI (Computer Aided Personal Interviewing) methodology is utilised and quota controls ensured that participants are representative of the local authority population by age, gender and social class.
- The first survey, conducted in 2018, surveyed the 10 largest local authorities. The second survey, completed in March 2019, was conducted with the 10 medium sized local authorities and Galway City. The remaining 10 local authorities were surveyed in 2020. Longford was included in the 2020 survey.
- 67% of respondents were satisfied with Longford County Council, which was significantly higher than the average level of satisfaction with all Councils, which was 59%.
- 42% believed that Longford County Council promotes economic activity, which is lower than the average of 57% amongst all local authorities.
- 33% of people felt that Longford County Council provides good value for money, where the average was 29% across all local authorities.
- 46% of people believe that Longford County Council is doing a good job, compared to the overall satisfaction rating of 55%.

NOAC REPORT NO 17

Internal Audit in Local Authorities

- Local authorities were asked whether the audit committee had conducted an assessment of the adequacy of Internal Audit resources, including staff skills, within the last 2 years. Longford was one of 17 authorities which had done so.
- The Head of Internal Audit reports directly to the Chief Executive in nine local authorities, including Longford County Council.
- In response to the question as to whether any External Quality Assurance review of Internal Audit has been undertaken, only six local authorities, excluding Longford, confirmed that this was the case.
- When questioned if a compliance test was carried out in 2016 with regards to the operation of the Internal Audit unit against the stated function in the charter, only five local authorities, excluding Longford County Council, confirmed this to be the case.

NOAC REPORT NO 10

Rented Houses Inspections - A Review of Local Authority Performance of Private Rented Houses Regulations Functions

	2014	2020
Number of Registered Tenancies	2,065	2,716
% Units inspected	8.4	8.03
Inspected Failed %	46.2	97.26

Data from report relates to 2014, data for 2020 taken from Performance Indicator Report.

NOAC REPORT NO 51

Public Spending Code 2021

The Public Spending Code (PSC) was developed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). The Code applies to both current and capital expenditure and to all public bodies in receipt of public funds. According to DPER, the Code brings together, in one place, details of the obligations of those responsible for spending public money. As local authority funding derives from a number of sources, including grants from several Government Departments, it was decided that the Chief Executives of individual local authorities should be responsible for carrying out the quality assurance requirements and that their reports should be submitted to NOAC for incorporation in a composite report for the local government sector.

The Quality Assurance reporting requirements consists of the following five steps:

1. Local authorities should draw up an inventory of projects/programmes at the different stages of the Project Life Cycle, in respect of all capital and current expenditure projects to a value greater than €0.5m.
2. Confirm publication on the local authority's website of summary information on all procurements in excess of €10m related to projects in progress or completed in the year under review and provide a link to the relevant website location.
3. Complete the seven specified checklists. Only one of each type of checklist per local authority is required and not one per each project/programme. The completion of the checklists is to be based on an appropriate sample of the projects/areas of expenditure relevant to that checklist.
4. Carry out a more in-depth review of selected projects/programmes such that, over a 3-5 year period, every stage of the project life-cycle and every scale of project will be subject to a closer examination. Revenue projects selected for in-depth review must represent a minimum of 1% of the total value of all revenue projects in the inventory, while the requirement in respect of capital projects is 5% of the total value of all capital projects in the inventory.
5. Complete a short summary report consisting of the inventory, procurement reference and checklists referenced in steps 1 to 3 and the local authority's judgment as to the adequacy of the appraisal/planning, implementation or review work that it examined as part of step 4, the reasons why it formed that judgment and its proposals to remedy any inadequacies found during the entire quality assurance process.

In the case of Longford County Council it complied with all five steps as highlighted above though it did not provide links to the online Publication of Summary Information of all Procurements in Excess of €10m as no procurements fell within the €10m category.

Particular points of note were:

- Longford had an expected lifetime expenditure being considered greater than €0.5m of €25,004,540 at the time of the survey while the national average was €238,802,224.
- Its expenditure being incurred that was greater than €500,000 had a projected lifetime capital expenditure of €70,350,537 while the national average was €488,173,084.

Expenditure being Considered - Greater than €0.5m (Capital and Current)				
Local Authority	Current Expenditure Amount in Reference Year	Capital Expenditure Amount in Reference Year (Non Grant)	Capital Expenditure Amount in Reference Year (Grant)	Projected Lifetime Expenditure
Longford County Council	€2,524,626	€0	€0	€25,004,540
Average	€7,327,049	€5,865,083	€3,972,866	€238,802,224

Expenditure being Incurred - Greater than €0.5m (Capital and Current)					
Local Authority	Current Expenditure Amount in Reference Year	Capital Expenditure Amount in Reference Year (Non Grant)	Capital Expenditure Amount in Reference Year (Grant)	Cumulative Expenditure to-date	Projected Lifetime Expenditure (Capital Only)
Longford County Council	€55,901,367	€0	€19,871,100	€30,624,550	€70,350,537
Average	€205,008,477	€45,469,548	€7,295,668	€340,256,110	€488,173,084

Projects/Programmes Completed or discontinued in the reference year - Greater than €0.5m (Capital and Current)				
Local Authority	Current Expenditure Amount in Reference Year	Capital Expenditure Amount in Reference Year (Non Grant)	Capital Expenditure Amount in Reference Year (Grant)	Final Outturn Expenditure
Longford County Council	€61,583	€430,705	€8,898,414	€18,475,616
Average	€109,826	€7,064,180	€2,819,326	€47,115,384

LONGFORD

Performance Indicators	2021		2020		2019		2018		2017		2016		2015		2014	
	Data	Median/Average	Data	Median/Average	Data	Median/Average	Data	Median/Average	Data	Median/Average	Data	Median/Average	Data	Median/Average	Data	Median/Average
H1 Social Housing provided in year per 1,000 population	2.16	0.59	1.37	0.64	2.68	1.15	1.73	0.84	0.78	0.53	n/a	3.43	2.41	1.91	0.33	0.80
H2 % of directly provided dwellings vacant at 31/12	7.19	3.16	6.35	3.18	8.00	3.15	4.98	2.77	4.78	2.73	5.13	3.02	5.96	3.5	5.82	3.8
H3a Average time from vacation date to PI year re-letting date (weeks)	67	34.44	48.78	32.69	84.69	28.17	70.64	27.75	11.87	28.9	47.54	32.99	24.43	28.43	16.24	31.43
H3b Average cost expended on getting re-tenanted units ready for re-letting	€26,524.73	€19,653.39	€20,865.21	€19,065.30	€30,535.43	€18,336.85	€14,019.68	€18,590.28	€7,571.27	€17,160.60	9,157.86	€15,877	4,709.57	€13,378.40	4,734.50	€11,534.91
H4 Average repair and maintenance cost per unit	€273.11	€1,150.13	€336.50	€1,119.82	€242.66	€1,168.99	€483.61	€841.83	€715.84	€1,311.82	685.47	€1,500.23	476.04	€1,292.57	586.26	€1,272.30
H5 Inspections (Dwellings inspected) carried out in year as % of registrations	No Data available	No data available	8.02	6.73	10.50	9.93	8.35	7.39	2.52	4.96	1.89	4.36	2.28	5.64	8.38	6.51
R1a % Regional Road KM that ever received a PSCI rating	96	91	95.2	77	99.72	99	100	99.36	99	96	99.00	99	50.00	68	32.50	47.9
R1b % Total Regional Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	50.71	30.90	43	31.19	44.41	38.28	46	37.58	11	28	24.00	30	10.00	20	22.00	11.15
R1c % Total Primary Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	38.84	26.05	32.3	24.00	23.86	23.08	17	23.39	17	20	15.00	13	9.00	11	29.00	6.4
R1d % Total Secondary Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	40.12	21.40	27.4	17.66	16.28	17.67	12	15.19	19	14	14.00	10	10.00	8	51.00	4.61
R1e % Total Tertiary Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	40.85	15.38	29.4	13.93	22.70	14.23	16	12.42	13	8	9.00	7	5.00	5	42.00	3.63

Performance Indicators	2021		2020		2019		2018		2017		2016		2015		2014	
R2a KM Regional Road strengthened using road improvement grants	4.4	13.40	4	14.7	4.40	13.17	5.40	13.4	3.50	10.3	3.10	10.8	3.50	10.2		
R2b KM Regional road resealed using road maintenance grants	10.3	19.9	10.9	19.4	4.60	14.27	5.10	15.3	4.40	11.9	4.20	12.2	3.20	8.3		
R3 % Motor tax transactions performed online	83.97	86.18	77.66	81.52	62.80	70.21	59.75	69.15	56.18	65.95	52.58	64.05	44.76	56.6	38.57	54.7
W1 % private schemes with water quality in compliance	No data available	No data available	no data available	No data available	96.98	97.50	96.50	97.1	97.45	98.46	94.54	97.77	96.36	99.07	93.40	97.9
E1 % households availing of a 3-bin service	70.98	55.09	70.76	89.73	22.43	48.36	23.08	43.91	27.23	39.53	28.43	37.7	29.04	34.87	26.95	31.66
E2 Pollution cases on hand at year end as % of the cases that arose that year	2.70	10.82	4.11	10.38	3.46	9.28	10.05	11.00	8.16	9.79	19.31	9.91	8.77	8.49		
E3 % area unpolluted or litter free	21	22	38	22	32.00	15.00	22	19.00	22	10	17.00	13	26.00	14	21.00	9.5
P1 New buildings inspected as % of new buildings notified	11.11	16.97	3.26	15.28	52.03	23.90	48.62	16.75	2.13	17	15.00	19.42	19.35	24	8.38	17.71
P2 % of determinations that confirmed the decision made by LA	57.14	71.17	80	73.17	57.14	73.07	64.29	75.92	66.67	79	100.00	77.78	50.00	71.88	42.86	71.7
P3 Ratio of planning cases being investigated at year end as to cases closed	2.02	3.60	1.65	3.74	1.47	2.74	1.14	3.03	1.57	2.41	1.51	2.87	1.42	2.61	10.40	2.88
P4 Cost per capita of the Planning Service	€45.22	33.37	€41.30	31.47	€41.15	€30.27	€43.94	29.24	€38.28	28.31	34.52	€26.96	37.41	€26.76	37.83	€25.27

Performance Indicators	2021		2020		2019		2018		2017		2016		2015		2014	
F1	€53.27	82.69	€56.51	79.93	€52.57	€60.79	€50.99	53.85	€44.55	57.74	47.95	€56.07	50.14	€57.88	49.01	€55.9
F2	N/A	1:27	N/A	1:28	N/A	1:24	0.00	1.42	N/A	1.45	n/a	1.5	N/A	1.6	N/A	1.66
F3	36.47	56.17	36.82	55.30	36.05	55.14	36.05	52.92	47.15	40.45	45.36	57.79	42.28	56.98	46.94	58.6
L1a	1.06	0.86	2	1.05	6.68	3.57	5.69	3.50	5.54	3.56	5.19	3.61	5.32	3.68	4.57	3.71
L1b	1.64	2.07	1.62	2.19	2.56	3.14	2.18	3.00	2.50	2.92	3.22	3.82	3.20	3.82		
L2	55.86	36.92	57.61	35.95	€46.02	€34.94	€47.32	30.52	42.19	31.00	46.22	€30.05	40.28	€30.02	41.10	€29.41
Y1	100.00	63.25	100.00	63.29	100.00	68.30	100.00	80.00	100.00	69.04	88.89	68.07	100.00	67.59	100.00	51.86
C1	7.34	5.89	7.18	6.06	7.17	5.95	7.70	5.99	7.20	5.75	6.87	5.64	6.89	5.58	7.00	5.63
C2a	1.67	2.89	2.56	3.01	4.58	3.71	2.98	3.74	3.38	3.74	3.69	3.76	3.53	3.52	3.54	3.34
C2b	0.13	0.19	0.17	0.20	0.30	0.36	0.31	0.35	0.30	0.33	0.31	0.38	0.32	0.39	0.33	0.4
C3	11.38	13.60	16.39	N/A	15,325.36	16,572	10,943.90	16,210.00	8290	14,632	10,505.59	12,422	10,040.13	11,666	10,384.64	9,651
C4	€2,642.33	3,521.62	€3,307.77	3,457.02	€2,337.07	3,060.84	€2,377.81	2,894.57	€2,423.13	€3,048.41	2,493.82	€2,675.69	3,169.12	€2,680.15	2,684.41	€2,646.8

Performance Indicators	2021		2020		2019		2018		2017		2016		2015		2014	
M2a	84	83.40	81	76	88	87	89	86.00	89.0	83	84.00	82.3	82.00	83	70.00	77
% Commercial Rates Collected in year																
M2b	90	88.8	89	88.3	90	89.80	93	89.00	92.0	85	90.00	88.0	88.00	85	86.00	84
% Rent & Annuities Collected in year																
M2c	69	81.6	65	79.4	59	78	55	75.00	60.0	74	57.00	70	55.00	68	57.00	67
% Housing Loans Collected in year																
J1	3.41	0.59	-0.63	-0.30	1.56	0.64	1.71	0.77	2.84	0.68	2.42	0.7	1.95	0.66	1.91	0.73
LEO jobs output per 1,000 population																
E6	1,805	5,942	1,997	6,209	N/A	N/A	N/A									
Total billable wattage of the public lighting system																
M3	14.90	11.05	16.00	12.21	N/A	13.53	N/A	11.62								
Per capita total cost of settled claims																
M4	40.13	31.83	35.34	26.75	N/A	N/A	N/A									
Total payroll costs as a % of revenue expenditure																



Stage 1 meeting

NOAC Stage 1 meeting with Longford County Council

Date:	7th February at 12 p.m., WebEx online meeting	
In attendance:	Longford County Council <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Paddy Mahon, Chief Executive (CE) ■ Barbara Heslin, Director of Services for Community, Library and Cultural Services, Corporate and Human Resources ■ John Brannigan, Director of Services for Housing, Planning, Regeneration and Capital Projects ■ Samantha Healy, Director of Services for Infrastructure, Climate Action and Innovation ■ Michael Nevin, Acting Director of Services for Enterprise and Ukrainian Humanitarian Response ■ Fema Flanagan, Acting Head of Finance 	NOAC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ciarán Hayes, alternate chair NOAC ■ Alan McDermott, NOAC Executive ■ John Goldrick, NOAC Executive

NOAC’s profile for Longford County Council was issued in advance of the meeting and formed the basis for the discussion on the day. At a later stage, a second meeting between Longford County Council and the NOAC Board will take place. The NOAC alternate Chair explained the role of NOAC, outlining that it was established in 2014 as an independent body, which is tasked with oversight of the local government system.

The CE gave an overview of the Council and the issues facing it. Matters discussed in detail were:

Council overview

The Council is represented by eighteen members. Council meetings take place on a monthly basis, with Corporate Policy Group meetings taking place a day in advance. The Council has four Strategic Policy Committees and a regeneration committee, which is useful for how regeneration is planned.

There is a strong working relationship between Council members and Council staff. The Corporate Plan, which was adopted in late 2019, will run until 2024. It was noted that this is a vital plan for the local authority, which informs the different team plans across the organisation. The staff PMDS system is also tied to the high level objectives within the Corporate Plan.

Housing

Housing has been the top priority for the local authority since the first action plan on housing, “Rebuilding Ireland”. This is an area which takes up a lot of resources, with a housing capital team in place over the last twelve months. With the exception of 2022, the Council has exceeded its housing targets every year.

Climate action

The Council noted that it will implement its climate action plan in the near future with expected implementation in late February.

Community

Longford has expanded its role in community development over the last number of years and highlighted a local community policing project that is in place. The Council is also part of the Healthy Framework 2019 - 2025 and is a leader in health planning.

Water

The Council is transitioning to Irish Water and is expecting to sign the support service agreement once the national master agreement is signed. The Council noted that it expects to be one of the first counties to sign up to the support service agreement. It also highlighted that managing the transition will involve a significant challenge to the Water team.

Regeneration

There is work underway in the regeneration of towns and villages, along with the delivery of the URDF and RRDF. Significant grants have been made available from government in this area and, in this context, the Council's biggest challenge is to match the 25% of funding which it receives.

Ukrainian situation

Longford has received 500 refugees from Ukraine, which, while still presenting a challenge for housing, is actually the lowest number of refugees nationally with refugees from both Ukraine and other countries. It was noted that hotels within the County don't have the capacity to accommodate large numbers and so the Council is trying to re-house people into vacant houses.

Finance

At present the uncertain economic climate, in tandem with energy costs and inflation, are all issues which the Council needs to deal with to successfully deliver services to its citizens.

Climate

Longford was one of the first areas in the country to be influenced by climate, with the closure of Shannonbridge power station by the ESB. This meant that one of the Council's major rate payers was out of business, with a subsequent deterioration of the Council's finances.

It was noted that the Just Transition is progressing slowly though there were some signs of positivity. Funding has been made available for community-led projects, with the first round consisting of approximately €200 million worth of funding. Some funding was earmarked for retrofitting of social housing though there is a cost gap that Longford County Council must meet on each unit. The second round was approved recently under the National Just Transition Fund, which is about to be launched. The Fund is a key pillar of the Government's plan for the Midlands region and is designed to support communities transitioning to a low carbon economy.

The Fund includes areas of capacity building, with part of the finances used to cover the tourist industry. Funding has also been allocated to the East Midlands Regional Assembly and it was noted that some funding is going into rewetting of boglands. Additionally, Laois and Offaly are developing programmes for ex-employees of Bord na Mona, upskilling them to avail of other job opportunities. Four Counties have also set up a committee to examine a brown to green strategy, with working groups established to move this forward. It was also highlighted that the Council is looking at using other sites such as Lanesborough to establish a battery storage facility and wind energy might be tapped into the system.

Demographics

The population of Longford has increased by 14% between Census 2016 and Census 2022. While there have been job losses within the County, employment has generally been resilient with few companies closing down during the Covid era. There has also been a substantial amount of inward migration into the County and some of the increase may be due to commuters who have re-located to Longford due to lower house prices than in larger urban centres and increased employment opportunities due to Centre Parcs being established. During this period the levels of housing vacancies have also dropped, with unfinished housing estates having been completed also.

Homelessness

There has been an increase in homeless presentations in recent years and this may be explained by people presenting with mental health issues brought on by the effects of Covid and with a greater demand than supply available. In past years, there had been approximately 70-80 homeless presentations per year, but this has increased to around 150 per year. On a positive note, it was noted that there weren't any rough sleepers within the County. The Council avails of the services of organisations such as the Simon Community, St Vincent de Paul and RESPOND in assisting with these presentations.

Housing maintenance costs

These costs are very low in Longford, due to the fact that when the Council receives an empty house back into stock it carries out extensive works on these units, costing in the region of 30-40 thousand euros with the advantage being that there are low maintenance costs in future years. In addition, the Council finds that it is difficult to source sufficient contractors to carry out maintenance repairs. It has been suggested that less extensive works could be undertaken, with a view to re-letting the units more promptly, which is being given consideration.

Rates

It was noted that Longford performed very well on rates and rents collection levels. There has been an 84% rate collection level for 2021 and it was noted that there are approximately 1,500 rate payers, with the ESB providing the largest rate payments. Longford has two rate collectors actively collecting rates and arrears and it was highlighted that there will be a potential fall-off in rates collections when the Department ceases to fund the lost ESB rates.

Digital strategies

There are four pillars to the strategy, with a few community elements within this. The Council is trying to encourage schools to become more involved in computer science with the aim to get school leavers applying for related jobs, especially in Athlone, which has several employers looking for staff in this area and within a commutable distance. Another element of the strategy is seeking to get broadband into rural areas of the County. The digital PMDS system has been implemented for staff and there is also the expectation of getting outdoor staff to move to paperless formats through the use of electronic devices and a pilot scheme is in place with road staff. The successful implementation of this roll out would mean significant cost savings for the local authority and Longford highlighted that it has a goal of expanding online payments for customers. It also highlighted the rollout of the ePlanning system which is expected in March and is expected to provide further savings.

With regards libraries, Longford is installing My Open libraries which allows for a self-service library and broadband facilities have been rolled out to a number of libraries as well as facilities for students to do homework.

Community funding applications are moving online, with schemes for parking permits, having map alerts for the roads network and severe weather events. The Council also wishes to digitise schemes and programmes for environmental schemes, allowing people to see past applications.

A remote working hub, now at 80% capacity, has also been successfully set up in Edgeworthstown. This has been bolstered with high speed broadband for the hub and it is operating at 80% capacity.

Urban regeneration programmes

A submission for Camlin quarter, consisting of five elements, has been sent to the Department. It contains a link road which will open up a significant amount of land for the town which includes an unused shopping centre. On a related point, there has been a fifteen per cent increase sought in the Local Property Tax, which has been granted, on the proviso that the extra revenue will be used for regeneration projects.

The alternate Chair invited Longford County Council to attend the full NOAC meeting for a Stage 2 meeting with the Board, later in 2023.

The minutes of this meeting and the future NOAC meeting will be circulated by the NOAC Executive to the Council. Once approved, these, along with the Stage 2 minutes and any presentations will be published on the NOAC website.



Stage 2 meeting

Final Minutes of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) Meeting with Longford County Council

Date:	Wednesday 28th June 2023 at 10:30 a.m.	
Venue:	The Custom House, Dublin	
Attended by:	<p>Chair</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Michael McCarthy <p>Members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Niall Quinn Fiona Quinn Kathleen Holohan Noel Harrington Brian Cawley <p>Apologies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Margaret Lane Ciarán Hayes Declan Breathnach <p>Secretariat</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Claire Gavin Alan McDermott 	<p>By Invite:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paddy Mahon, Chief Executive (CE) Barbara Heslin, Director of Services - Community, Library and Cultural Services, Corporate and Human Resources, John McKeon, Director of Services - Finance and Information Technology, John Brannigan, Director of Services - Housing, Planning, Regeneration and Capital Projects, Michael Nevin, A/Director of Services - Enterprise and Ukrainian Humanitarian Response Samantha Healy, Director of Services - Infrastructure, Climate Action and Innovation

Meeting with Longford County Council

The NOAC Chair welcomed the officials from Longford and invited the Chief Executive (CE) to give an overview of the Council and the issues facing it. The CE gave a presentation which is included separately.

Overview

Longford County Council’s mission is to work with its communities and partners to develop the county as a dynamic, vibrant, safe and prosperous county, celebrating its diversity, culture and heritage and, through strong leadership, build safe, healthy and sustainable communities. The Council highlighted that it has a good working relationship with its elected members and noted the challenges facing it coming into an election year. In particular, Longford highlighted that it had been chosen as a pilot county in the Local Community Safety Partnership which brings together statutory services, the voluntary and community sector, local councillors and community members to work together to identify and tackle community safety issues that affect people in Longford. It has €30 million going into town regeneration and needs to meet the expectation of its members as well as match funding. In fact, its elected members agreed to increase its commercial rates for the first time in 12 years which shows its ambition.

Specific areas queried by the Chair and board members included:

Governance

The Longford Council Audit Committee has five members which are chaired by an external person who is a qualified accountant. The Committee consists of two ex-Councillors, an accountant and two solicitors and meets six times a year. In terms of Council meetings, media do attend and this would be a routine occurrence. Longford noted that it was the first county to complete its audit this year, which is about to be signed off, and is usually one of the first in recent years. In terms of internal audit functions, Longford had noted concerns regarding its internal audit function which was mentioned in its annual audit report by LGAS in 2015/16 and felt that it had since addressed those concerns. Longford County Council felt its internal audit function needed to be improved and it put together a control and compliance unit which has a procurement officer, internal auditor and staff looking at risk. It felt that this approach had to be part of the culture of the organisation and its reports are now of a very high quality. In particular, its Quality Assurance Review is in hand and work has commenced. It produces about six reports a year and a report goes to the Council once a year with very positive feedback being received. The issues addressed in the 2015/16 LGAS report are now fully addressed.

Housing

The Council highlighted that housing is its number one priority and it is delivering houses through turnkey projects, on its own and with Approved Housing Bodies (AHB). In particular, it is working on vacant properties via the Croí Cónaithe Fund. There has been a lot of demand on resources since the lifting of the eviction ban. It highlighted that it had 2,300 social houses in the county with approximately 500-600 of those houses coming from AHB. Its housing unit expects to deliver 74 units for 2023 with another 90 units in the pipeline. However, a lot of its housing stock is quite old and the county has a policy of deep retrofitting houses once they become available. This means a higher cost per house and can also result in an increase in its vacancy rate. The Council noted that it is committed to reducing its vacancy rate and expect to bring it down to 3% by year end - it currently stands at 4.5%.

Another challenge in this area is finding contractors to carry out work and it even had a recent example of where there was no bidder willing to take on a project. They have had a positive response to CPO's and there is currently a rent review being undertaken on their social housing stock.

Recruitment

Staffing is an issue for Longford, as it is for many counties, and it noted issues in getting and retaining staff. It highlighted areas such as emergency services and planning as areas it was struggling in.

Planning

The council is experiencing staffing challenges in the planning area which seems to be an issue for the overall sector. In particular, Longford is seeing more legal challenges in terms of planning and this shows the need for more planning staff.

Roads

Longford has seen a lot of demand in terms of infrastructure with roads being of particular demand. The Council noted that it was disappointed that the funding to continue the design of the development of the M4 motorway has been withdrawn and it will be looking into getting this done in the future. It highlighted that this development, which extended the M4 by 50km, was important to the county as it linked it to the capital which is vital in terms of investment. The Council had invested a lot of time and effort into this project and for it not to proceed was very disappointing. In terms of the condition of its roads, they are considered to be of a high standard which requires continuous investment and inflation was having an impact on this. However, it felt that it was worth the investment given the cost to maintain would be less than to allow standards to fall and, ultimately, bring them back up to standard. Longford noted that the assessment of the road network was not outsourced and it worked with the Road Management Office in this regard. The Council noted it has a high level of satisfaction with communities and engages them in projects. It noted that a communications unit is in place for this and highlighted its high level of visibility in local media.

Climate

Longford documented that it was in line to achieve its 2030 climate targets of a 51% reduction in energy use. In particular, it has seen a big rollout in the use of LED lighting in public lighting (70% of its network) as well as significant funding for active travel via the Department of Transport. Longford also carries out deep retrofitting of its vacant housing and ensures they are brought to a BER B3 standard before being let to new tenants. It also highlighted that its new housing has a BER A2 standard. In terms of Longford Leisure Centre, it has been converted to biomass for heating and PV panels have been installed. Longford noted that it has rolled out Green Procurement across the organisation and that it has a full and robust inspection regime when it comes to the environment with an increased focus on biodiversity and heritage.

Digital Innovation

Longford County Council teamed up with Microsoft and Ericsson to create a coding based competition, Dreamspace, in order to promote and encourage digital technology in schools across the county. The Edgeworthstown showcase had over 300 students from across primary schools in the county and the county will be one of the first in Ireland to have computer science as a leaving cert option in all its secondary schools. This will help target the digital divide and the setting up of remote working hubs in the county along with digital employers, such as Ericsson, being based nearby is expected to bring more jobs into the county as well as keep employees in the region.

Library Service

The Council highlighted its libraries and its work across communities in Longford. It noted that its visitor numbers had been impacted by Covid but it now engages in innovative festivals and events as well as engaging through social media. There is proactive engagement with creative communities and they have an innovative programme of events for STEAM, Sensory, Age Friendly, Right to Read, Climate Action and Creative Ireland. The Council noted the use of myopenlibrary and the new library in Edgeworthstown as important developments while also noting changes of demographics in the county.

Longford's libraries are also a key player in helping integrate both Ukrainian and International refugees providing language classes, social clubs and festivals.

Corporate Plan

Longford highlighted the robustness of its Corporate Plan which is fed down through the organisation using systems like PMDS which are used for staff goal setting and appraisal. The Plan is felt to be robust and has a goal of continually improving customer service. In this regard, staff are encouraged to use its open learning scheme and, so far, 30-40% of staff have completed some sort of scheme in recent years. Longford provides a comprehensive health and wellbeing programme and there is proactive management of sick leave and Longford met its sick leave target for 2022.

Finance

Longford has a cumulative surplus of approximately €365,000 at year end 2022. It has had a surplus since 2016 and it has a cumulative credit capital balance of €15m with an increase of €1.3m in 2022. It noted that it has improved its fixed assets in 2022 and borrowed €2m in 2022 to fund a number of regeneration projects. However, the closure of the Lough Ree Power Station, ten years ahead of the planned closure and as it was its biggest rate payer and a large employer in the region, has had an impact. This has been dealt with in a positive way with lost rates being recouped from central government and the implementation of the Just Transition initiative. In terms of the recouped rates, these are very welcomed by the Council though this funding is on a year-by-year basis, which creates uncertainty in the longer term and the Council is engaging the Department on this. It noted that its ability to meet match funding has been curtailed and with a lot of programmes available, this makes decision-making difficult. Overall, the Council is able to provide services but it's getting more difficult each year.

Income

The Council highlighted that income collection was quite good with percentage increases in commercial rates and housing loans in 2022. However, its housing loans collections were below the national average in 2021.

In terms of income generation, it is not expecting the elected Members to approve an increase in commercial rates for 2024 which has an impact when it is looking at matching funding initiatives. It highlighted that its LPT has hit its maximum increase of 15% and members had already increased rates for 2023. In particular, Longford felt that a national tier-based funding model should be applied given the disparities in ability between large urban local authorities and small rural local authorities.

Integration

Longford has 168 refugees in pledged accommodation and in collaboration with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage plans to refurbish an old army barracks in Longford Town in order to assist in that regard. It has a good inter-community forum which has helped many Ukrainian refugees integrate very well into its community. In particular, it oversees the SICAP budget (approx. €700,000 in 2023) which includes Ukrainian support. In terms of challenges, it needs to be aware of duplication of services given support coming from the Council and central government and need to be sure not to unsettle the social balance in the county. Longford is also taking in International Protection refugees and has used its community forum, which worked very well during Covid, to assist in this area. Coordinated support is seen as being very important with numerous agencies being involved in integration. Longford has funding for four Integration Officers in this area. Longford's libraries are also an excellent support and they organise English classes, numerous clubs which encourage integration in the area and a number of cultural festivals to encourage those cultures.

Economy

Most large employers in the county are FDI with Center Parcs being a notable employer with approximately 1,300 staff. The LEO in Longford also created 83 net jobs in 2022 and the Council feels that it has a good investment environment and is competitive. The LEO's encourage the growth and development of micro-businesses in areas such as training and financial support and it aims to find quality projects which can transfer over to the Enterprise Ireland portfolio.

In terms of challenges, it needs to have more suitable land for investment and the full employment economy in Ireland makes it difficult for firms to recruit. Longford also noted that it has two digital hubs and five community broadband points and its attraction is its central location, staff retention rates, the availability of units and quality of life.

Edgeworthstown Wind Turbine

There was objection from up to 200 residents to the development of a wind turbine in Edgeworthstown and the Council noted that those objections were considered as part of the planners report. The project was approved. The Council noted that its elected members had a good relationship with the Planning department.

Regional development

The Midlands regional investment plan was discussed which has a focus on climate, digital and the food and drinks industry. This plan is linked to the Just Transition fund which was recently launched. In terms of retail, core town centres need freshening up and this is realised in the regional enterprise plan. The County is also collaborating with universities to assist with clustering, food and drinks, its engineering network and green issues.

In terms of businesses in other counties impacting Longford, it was noted that development is seen on a regional level where a business in a nearby county could provide employment to communities in Longford and it noted Center Parcs as such an example. The Council also noted investment in towns such as Granard which has a significant road project in planning and housing refurbishments. The Council highlighted that such investment is occurring around the county and this continued investment will encourage people to come to the county and invest further in it.

Risk register

Cyber Security is an important item on the risk register for Longford. It is one of the first counties to have cyber insurance. It has a control and compliance unit which has a responsibility for maintaining the register and it is very proactive in this regard. The Council feel that it has developed a model that works very well.

It also highlighted match funding and reputational risks on the register as the county has had the biggest population percentage rise in the country which means a bigger customer base and greater need to deliver projects. It noted that its Audit Committee reviews the register. It also confirmed that it had reviewed its position in relation to the payroll as a standing item every two years so that recent issues with PRSI that came to light in DCC would not occur. Internal audit have just completed a report which will be submitted to the Head of Finance for sign off. They also have a new SPC on Governance. It was introduced about four years ago and is working well. Members agreed it was necessary.

Customer Service

Longford outlined that a key part of their Customer Service was to be accessible, visible, engaging and integrated with communities. The key for them is to build trust and honesty. If they cannot deliver a service they explain why not and consider if it can be delivered in the future. The council has a dedicated communications unit.

Conclusion

The Chair thanked the local authority officials for their attendance at the meeting and for the good exchange of information on the matters raised. It was outlined that the minutes and a report on the two stages of the scrutiny process will be published on the NOAC website at a future date.



4

Stage 2 Presentation





Vision

Our vision is make Longford a prosperous county that seeks to support

- Vibrant economy
 - Rural quality of life
 - Active and safe communities
 - Diversity, culture and heritage
 - Healthy and sustainable natural environment
 - Sense of community pride and place
-



Mission

Our mission is to work with our communities and partners to develop Longford as a dynamic, vibrant, safe and prosperous county, celebrating its diversity, culture and heritage and, through strong leadership, build safe, healthy and sustainable communities.



NOAC Stage 2 Scrutiny Meeting

Housing Planning Regeneration and Capital Projects



How are we performing

- Housing Delivery Team
 - 98 units on site – 74 for delivery in 2023
 - 90 in pipeline
 - Town Centre First Officer – vacant homes officer
 - Energy Retrofit
 - Amenity projects - 85km of trails, skate park, Mall
 - E-planning
-



Challenges

- Urban regeneration match funding
 - Ongoing annual maintenance budgets
 - Increased demand for social housing
 - Staff retention
-



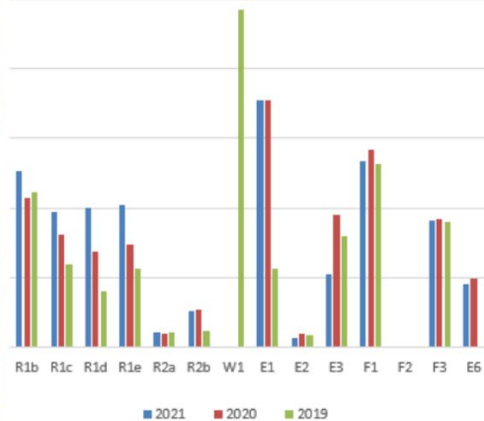
NOAC Stage 2 Scrutiny Meeting

Infrastructure, Climate Action and Innovation

How are we performing

R1b	% Total Regional Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	↑
R1c	% Total Primary Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	↑
R1d	% Total Secondary Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	↑
R1e	% Total Tertiary Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	↑
R2a	KM Regional Road strengthened using road improvement grants	↑
R2b	KM Regional road resealed using road maintenance grants	0.6 ↓
W1	% private schemes with water quality in compliance	No data available
E1	% households availing of a 3-bin service	↑
E2	Pollution cases on hand at year end as % of the cases that arose that year	↓
E3	% area unpolluted or litter free	↓
F1	Cost per capita of Fire Service	↓
F2	Average time to mobilise Brigade re Fire (Minutes) (FT)	↓
F3	% of Fire Cases in which first attendance is within 10 minutes	0.35 ↓
E6	Total billable wattage of the public lighting system	↓

Indicator Performance 2019 - 2021



Performance Deliverables

Roads

- Roads in Longford can be considered as Good/Very Good
- Very good management of the roads network
- Track record of investment in maintenance and restoration
- Significant upgrade works on national, regional and local roads. LIS and CIS continue to be heavily subscribed

Climate

- On track to meet 2030 target of 51% reduction in Energy use. Over 70% of public lighting LED
- Housing retrofit. Voids retrofitted to B2 standard before being let to new tenants and new builds to A2
- Longford Leisure Centre converted to biomass for heating, PV panels installed
- Rolling out of Green Procurement across the organisation

Environment

- Full and robust inspection regime
- Increased focus on biodiversity and heritage
- Enforcement



Performance Deliverables

Emergency Services

- Response times remain relatively consistent
- Investment in new facilities and equipment

Water

- Consistent high performance on water quality and leakage

Innovation

- Longford Dreamspace Showcase. Over 300 National School pupils participated
- Supports Longford’s objective to be the first County to offer computer science as a Leaving Certificate subject in all of County Longford’s Secondary Schools
- Successful Innovation Week with high employee engagement, including outdoor staff engagement
- Removing the digital divide



Challenges

Roads

- Impact of cost inflation on Roads programme
- Uncertainty of N4 upgrade on road safety and the economic development and growth of County Longford and the wider west and northwest region

Climate

- Delivering 51% reduction in absolute carbon, greenhouse gases.
- Behaviour change in a large agricultural economy
- The rural nature of the county

Environment

- Volume and pace of new regulations and legislation

Emergency Services

- Recruitment and retention of retained fire officers

Innovation

- Embedding innovation throughout the organisation and with stakeholders and partners, not just pockets.



NOAC Stage 2 Scrutiny Meeting

Community, Library and Cultural Services, Corporate and Human Resources



Community – How are we Performing

- Successfully integrating new community based initiatives in to our core functions
 - Award of LEADER, EURI and Transitional Programme grants of almost €7m to 150 projects over their lifetime.
 - Overseeing SICAP budget incl. Ukrainian support (almost €700,000 in 2023)
 - Overseeing 15 CLÁR projects over €531,000 in 2022
 - Award of Community Support Fund grants totalling €262,757 to 131 Community Groups in 2023
 - Successfully implementing and overseeing pilot programmes sports programmes Healthy Ireland programmes
-



Community – Challenges

- Myriad of new initiatives from a variety of Government Departments and Agencies
 - Need for all of Government approach
 - Population increase including diversity of population
 - Consultation fatigue for community groups
 - Capacity in community groups
 - Keeping employees and communities informed and updated
-



Corporate – How are we Performing

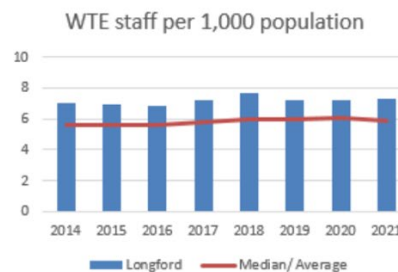
- Robust Corporate Plan implementation,
 - safeguarding data protection rights of individuals
 - Recognised as leaders in occupational Health & Safety
 - Improving our customer service delivery and meet our customer service targets in our Customer Charter
 - Dedicated professional support for the Elected Members and Democratic Structures
 - Promoting a positive image of our county and Council through good, proactive and professional communications
-



Corporate – Challenges

- Legislation can be complex and at times can be perceived as rigid by citizens/customers/employees
- Embedding the Communications function and creating an awareness of how the function can support sections in achieving their strategic objectives will take time
- Employee turnover and changes in employee assignments
- Loss of corporate knowledge

Human Resources – Performance Indicators





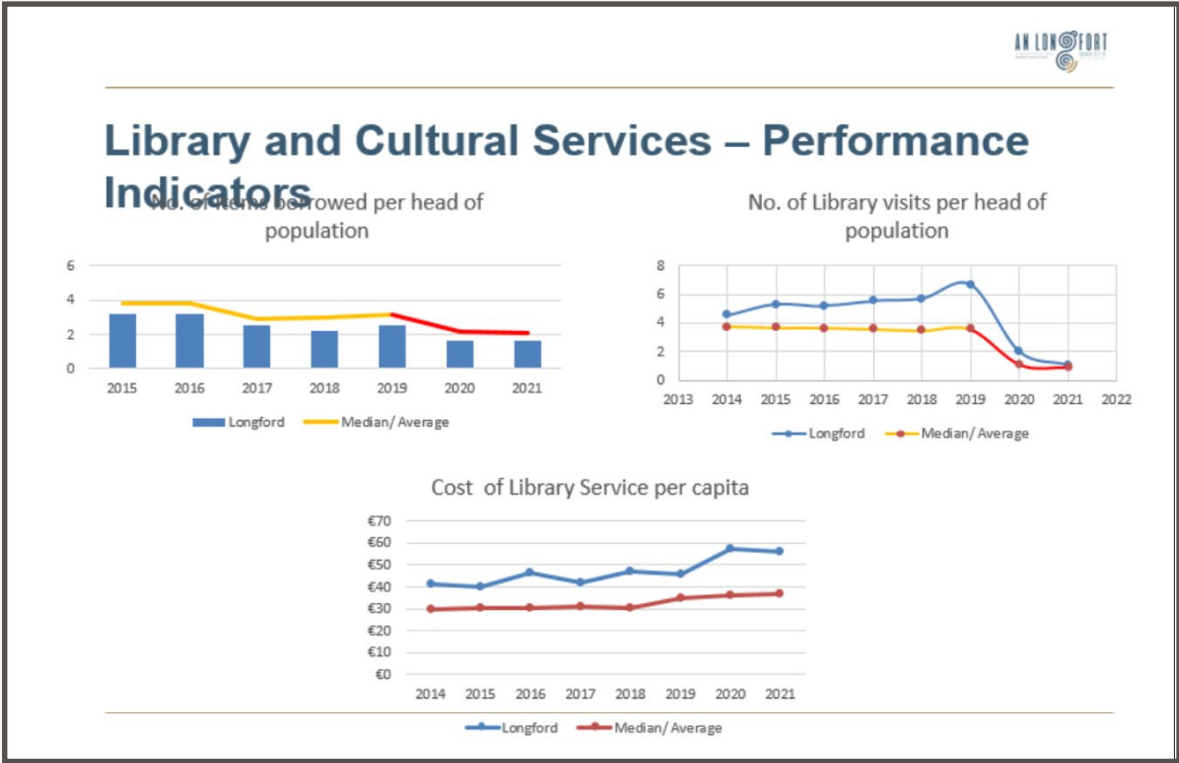
Human Resources – How are we Performing

- Delivering a programme of work taking account of objectives in the Corporate Plan and the Local Authority People Strategy
 - Proactive management of sick leave and occupational health referrals has resulted in Longford meeting the public sector sick leave target for 2022
 - Providing a comprehensive health and wellbeing programme. Employees are facilitated to have their say in the health and wellbeing programme through the PMDS process
 - The Open Learning Scheme supports employees returning to third level education creating a culture of continuous lifelong learning
-



Human Resources – Challenges

- Recruitment and retention of employees in a very competitive labour market
 - High refusal rates combined with high turnover rate presents challenges not only with recruitment and retention but also with learning and development of employees
 - Competition completed, appointments, promotions, resignations and retirements has increased every year over the past 5 years
 - Increased pressure to recruit new resource for new initiatives with short notice and very tight deadlines
 - Embedding PMDS in to our culture
-



Library and Cultural Services – How are we Performing

- Impact of COVID-19 on visitor numbers
- Proactive engagement with creative communities through Creative Ireland and Arts Service
- New and innovative festivals, events and bursaries being developed, rolled out and supported
- Innovative programme of events for STEAM, Sensory, Age Friendly, Right to Read, Climate Action and Creative Ireland
- Outreach programme highlighting the benefits of the library to all the community stakeholders
- Promotional campaign on our social media channels



Library and Cultural Services – Challenges

- Repercussions of COVID-19
 - Continued investment in core funding and capital
 - Facility improvements
 - Expectations of communities
 - Changing demographics
-



NOAC Stage 2 Scrutiny Meeting

Finance and Information Technology

Finance and Information Technology

How we are performing (Finance)

Financial Standing

- Cumulative Revenue a/c surplus €365k.
 - €5k for 2022.
 - Surplus since 2016.
 - Surplus as % of Income = 0.82 (Avg = 1.24)
 - Expenditure per Capita = €1,451.30 (Avg = €1,470.22)
- Increase in **Fixed Assets** €7.6m in 2022.
 - Mainly Housing.
- Increase in **borrowings** €2.4m.
 - Regeneration Projects.
- Decrease in accrued Rates €1.2m.
 - Lough Ree Power Station lost income.
- Increase in **Payroll Costs** €1.1m.
 - Additional Staff.
 - Rollback of FEMPI measures.
- PL claims cost per Capita = €14.90 (Avg = €11.05)
- CMC as % of Total Revenue Exp. = 15% (Avg = 12%)
- Payroll Costs as % of Total Revenue Exp. = 40% (Avg = 32%).

Capital Account

- Cumulative **credit balance** €15m.
 - Increased by €1.3m in 2022.
- **Unfunded Capital Balances** €986k.
 - €852k Vacant Homes/Voids.
 - €134k Regeneration Projects (Emerging Match-Funding Gap).
- **Development Contributions**
 - Arrears decreased by €227k to €2.34m.
 - Arrears <5 years = €1.8m (77% of total arrears)
 - Bad debt Provision of €1.7m.

Income Collection

- **Commercial Rates (Collectible 2022 - €8.28m)**
 - Collection % Increased by 6% to 90% in 2022.
 - National Average (2021) = 83.4%
 - Arrears = €860k
 - Bad Debt Provision = €531k (62%)
- **Rents (Collectible 2022 - €8.2m)**
 - Collection % remained steady at 89% in 2022.
 - National Average (2021) = 88.8%
 - Arrears = €883k
 - Bad Debt Provision = €820k (93%)
- **Housing Loans (Collectible 2022 = €1.48m)**
 - Collection % increased by 8% to 77% in 2022.
 - National Average (2021) = 81.6%
 - Arrears = €346k
 - Bad Debt Provision = €150k (43%).

Finance and Information Technology

Challenges (Finance)

Local Income Generation

- No scope to increase.
- LPT maxed at 15%.
- Members increased Rates for 2023.
- Largest % population increase in state (2022 census).
- Baseline review needs to be targeted (not 'one size fits all').
- Small Rural LA's V Large Urban LA's.
- Tier-based funding model required.
- Downward revaluations for Utility Providers.

Discretionary Expenditure

- Very little Discretionary Expenditure.
- New Service Initiatives, only part funded and eventually crystallise into Core Services (Payroll & Pension obligations).
- High proportion of Fixed v Variable costs in Sector.
- Tempering Members

Funding Gaps

- LA Sector Funding model not comparable with other Government Departments and Bodies.
- Ever increasing demands for 'match-funding' for Capital Projects.
- Uisce Eireann transfer Stranded Costs.
- Meeting Climate Action targets.
- Costs of providing services for

Staff & Payroll

- Recruitment costs attracting & retaining the right staff in a highly competitive environment.
- Ageing staff demographic.
- Local Churn.
- Current & Future Pension Costs.
- 'Sunk' costs of Contract/temporary posts.
- CID's converting temporary posts to permanent posts.



NOAC Stage 2 Scrutiny Meeting

Refugee Integration, Enterprise



Refugee Integration

Performance

- BOTPs – 683 registered in County Longford as of June 21st.
- 168 in pledged accommodation – Vacant and Shared
- Refurbishment Programme – 1 Council owned asset authorised to proceed
- Dedicated team (3 persons) in Longford County Council coordinating supports
- Community Forum - Inter Agency forum working well.
- Ukrainian Community integrating very well
- IPAs - 2 dedicated centres in Longford Town (1 long standing, 1 new) . No major community issues.
- Syrian Resettlement Programme- Approx 50 in phase 1 – 129 in phase 2

Challenges

- Co-ordination of supports. Will be helped by the establishment of the proposed Local Integration Model for local authorities
- Importance of a lead co-ordinator. Avoid duplication, potential confusion over responsibilities
- Pressure on local services
- Suitability of accommodation- location , type
- Longer-term solutions – Temporary to permanent?
- Community acceptance, communication



Enterprise

Performance

- Industrial base through post Brexit/Covid robust
- Good Resilience
- Most of the larger companies in expansion mode
- 83 net jobs created in LEO portfolio 2022
- 2 digital hubs plus five Community Broadband Points
- Attractors – Central Location, staff retention rates, available units, Quality of Life

Challenges

- Staff Recruitment
- Quantum of suitable zoned land/sites and units available
- Shortage of accommodation options for employees
- Lower level of new micro start ups in full employment
- Retention of young talent/living in Midlands
- Promotion of County in competitive arena
- Highlighting our work/achievements



National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC)
An Coimisiún Náisiúnra Maoirseachta & Iniúchoíreachta

Postal Address: Custom House, Dublin 1, D01 W6X0.

Website: www.noac.ie

Email: info@noac.ie