DETAILED SPECIFICATION OF REQUIREMENTS

The Contracting Authority invites tenders for the award of a contract as specified hereunder.

Specification

Laois County Council Economic Development Strategy

Background:

County Laois occupies a unique strategic position at the heart of Ireland and is the only county in the Midlands Region with direct motorway and rail connectivity to all five cities. Located within the Eastern and Midland growth corridor, Laois is increasingly functioning as both a residential destination and an economic gateway between Dublin and the wider regions.

Over the last decade, County Laois has experienced significant population growth driven by inward migration, housing affordability, quality of life factors and improved transport connectivity. Census 2022 recorded a population of 91,657 and growth is projected to grow to 97,500 by 2031. While this growth presents significant opportunities, it also creates a pressing need to increase local employment opportunities, strengthen economic resilience and ensure that economic growth keeps pace with population expansion.

Laois faces a distinct economic challenge. Despite its strategic location and growing population, the county experiences one of the highest levels of outbound commuting in the State. The Laois Commuter Survey 2026 indicates that approximately 69% of surveyed workers commute outside the county for employment, predominantly to the Greater Dublin Area, with an average commute of 1 hour and 25 minutes each way. The survey also indicates that more than 80% of respondents would prefer to work closer to home if suitable employment opportunities were available.

This pattern represents both a challenge and a significant opportunity. The county benefits from a highly skilled workforce, substantial spending power and a growing residential population, but much of the economic value generated by residents is currently realised outside the county. A key objective of this strategy will be to identify practical and achievable measures to capture more of this economic potential locally.

The county is also entering a period of economic transition and transformation. National policies including Project Ireland 2040, the National Planning Framework, Town Centre First, Our Rural Future and the National Just Transition Framework are reshaping how economic development, settlement growth and climate action are addressed. At regional level, the Midlands Region is increasingly focused on advanced manufacturing, renewable energy, innovation, digital transformation and the development of competitive regional economies.

Major economic opportunities are emerging through:

- The development of the Junction 17 National Enterprise Park.
- Expansion opportunities at Canal Road Business Park and other strategic employment locations.
- The growth of remote and hybrid working.
- Development of enterprise and innovation infrastructure.
- The Midlands Just Transition process.
- Increasing interest in regional investment locations outside Dublin.
- Growth opportunities across advanced manufacturing, agri-food, logistics, renewable energy, tourism and digital enterprise.

At the same time, global economic uncertainty, climate adaptation requirements, technological disruption, artificial intelligence, skills shortages, housing delivery pressures and infrastructure constraints are reshaping the economic landscape. These challenges require a coordinated, evidence-based and place-led approach to economic development that aligns investment, infrastructure, skills, enterprise supports and land use planning.

The Economic Development Strategy will provide this framework and establish a shared vision for sustainable economic growth, employment creation, investment attraction and enhanced quality of life across County Laois.

Context:

The Economic Development Strategy for County Laois should provide a clear strategic roadmap for the county's economic development over the next five years (2027-2031), setting out a vision for a resilient, competitive, and sustainable economy. It should identify opportunities and priorities for employment growth, enterprise development, investment attraction, skills enhancement, town centre regeneration, retail growth, and the transition to a low-carbon economy.

The Strategy should set out a clear vision for County Laois as a leading location for enterprise, employment, innovation and investment in the Midlands Region and establish measurable outcomes to be achieved over the strategy period.

The Strategy should include a detailed implementation framework with measurable objectives and actions aimed at supporting indigenous enterprise, attracting inward investment, increasing retail footfall, reducing vacancy levels, fostering innovation, and enhancing the overall economic competitiveness of County Laois.

The Strategy must be aligned with relevant national, regional, and local policy objectives ensuring a coordinated and evidence-led approach to shaping the county's future economic prosperity, including:

- Project Ireland 2040 / National Planning Framework
- National Development Plan 201/-2027
- Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan
- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019 -2031
- Laois County Development Plan, 2021-2027
- Laois Local Economic and Community Plan,
- Laois Climate Action Plan 2024-2029,
- Our Rural Future Rural Dev Strategy 2021 – 2025
- Midlands Enterprise property Portfolio
- Advanced Manufacturing Strategy for the Midlands 2026
- Laois Destination and Experience Development Plan
- Vision 2030 – An Irish Tourism Strategy for Growth
- Laois Commuter Survey 2026

Strategic Employment Ambition

County Laois has significant potential to increase employment density and improve its proportion of nationally supported enterprise employment. The Strategy should establish robust and evidence-based targets for indigenous enterprise growth, inward investment and employment creation, taking account of projected population growth, labour force participation and commuting patterns.

Strategic Challenges and Opportunities

The Strategy should specifically identify and respond to the key economic challenges and opportunities facing County Laois including:

- Population growth and the creation of quality local employment opportunities.
- High levels of outbound commuting and the retention of economic value within the county.
- Enterprise development, inward investment and employment growth.
- Strategic employment land, property solutions and infrastructure requirements.

- Town centre revitalisation, commercial vacancy and place-making.
- Workforce development, talent attraction and skills alignment.
- Rural economic diversification and community resilience.
- Digital transformation, innovation and emerging technologies.
- Climate adaptation, decarbonisation and the green economy.
- The Midlands Just Transition opportunity.
- Development of sectoral and geographic economic clusters.

Objectives:

The primary objective of the Economic Development Strategy is to establish a clear and ambitious framework for sustainable economic growth, job creation, enterprise development and investment attraction across County Laois, while enhancing competitiveness, supporting balanced urban and rural development and improving quality of life for those who live, work, invest, study and visit in the county.

In parallel, Laois County Council is due to commence a full review of the Laois County Development Plan (2021-2027) (as varied) from mid-2027. Therefore a key objective for the Council is to ensure that the Economic Development Strategy and the emerging County Development Plan are aligned, to ensure that the development plan framework, including the zoning of sufficient lands for the right employment opportunities at an appropriate scale and location, reflects the evidence base in the EDS.

The EDS will be used to inform key decision making for the emerging CDP , that:

- Increase sustainable employment opportunities within County Laois.
- Reduce economic leakage arising from outbound commuting.
- Support the growth and competitiveness of indigenous enterprise.
- Strengthen the county's attractiveness for inward investment and business expansion.
- Enhance the availability of enterprise property, strategic employment land and supporting infrastructure.
- Support vibrant town centres and thriving rural economies.
- Foster innovation, entrepreneurship and digital transformation.
- Develop a skilled and adaptable workforce aligned to future industry needs.
- Promote sustainable and low-carbon economic growth.
- Position County Laois as a leading location in which to live, work, invest, study and visit.

Priority Sector Assessment

The consultants shall undertake a detailed assessment of existing and emerging sectors with the greatest potential to contribute to employment growth and economic value creation within County Laois.

The assessment should identify:

- Existing sectoral strengths.
- Emerging growth opportunities.
- Competitive advantages.
- Export potential.
- Supply chain opportunities.
- Skills requirements.

- Property and infrastructure requirements.

Particular consideration should be given to:

- Advanced Manufacturing.
- Engineering.
- Agri-food and Food Innovation.
- Logistics and Distribution.
- Renewable Energy and Green Economy.
- Tourism and Visitor Economy.
- Digital Enterprise.
- Professional Services.
- Creative Industries.
- Health and Life Sciences.

Scope of Work:

The Strategy should be developed through a structured, collaborative process that integrates economic analysis, spatial planning, stakeholder engagement, and policy alignment.

The consultants will be responsible for delivering the following:

Baseline Assessment:

Stage 1

A comprehensive Baseline Assessment will be undertaken for County Laois to inform the development of the Economic Development Strategy.

The consultants shall undertake a review of relevant international, national, regional and local economic development strategies, policy frameworks and best practice examples to identify transferable lessons and opportunities relevant to County Laois.

Stage 2

The assessment will include:

- an analysis of current and emerging economic trends, demographic and employment data, sectoral opportunities, and the infrastructure required to support sustainable economic growth and development.
- A detailed and comprehensive Employment Land Assessment of County Laois in accordance with the OPR Practice Note PN04 inclusive of undertaking the following actions:
- Completion of an Employment Land Assessment (ELA) within 4 months of instruction to proceed. The detailed ELA should be prepared as the basis for the CDP review, which is due to commence in Mid 2027.

  The ELA should include the following steps

  Step 1: Survey – Take Stock:

Gather existing data on lands for enterprise and employment uses, industrial uses, general business and mixed use

Assess site suitability to determine the total area of available land suitable to accommodate enterprise and employment uses

Step 2: Analysis – Determine Future Workforce Supply Desk Study

Forecast workforce supply

Determine employment sector demand

Step 3. Plan – Determine Employment Land Requirements

Translate future workforce supply into land-use requirements

Quantify the shortfall / surplus of land for each employment sector.

Conclude the Assessment and prepare the final report. The assessment should include an analysis of employment needs / demands for between 2027 to 2031 for the Economic Development Strategy, and to the end of 2040, to align with the forthcoming CDP timeframe, which is expected to be from 2030 - 2040.

Preparation and production of GIS Mapping which identifies each site assessed supported by robust and detailed assessment of each

Stage 3

The assessment process will also include consultation and engagement with key stakeholders, including but not limited to:

- IDA Ireland
- Enterprise Ireland
- Laois Chamber Alliance
- Connect Laois (Local Dev Company)
- LOETB
- Local Enterprise Office Laois
- The Connected Hubs network – including Portlaoise Enterprise Centre, Portarlington Enterprise Centre, The Cube, Bloom HQ, Vision 85.
- Coillte
- IFA
- Elected Members
- Local businesses
- Retail representatives
- Tourism stakeholders
- Community and voluntary organisations
- Property developers and investors

Stage 4

An option in relation to ongoing support in the evolution of the CDP that includes written advice on all submissions received following the consultation period of the full review of the LCDP (21-27) (as varied), and inputting, where necessary, in providing response during the formulation of the Chief Executive Report should be factored into the tender price.

Comparative Benchmarking

The Baseline Assessment shall benchmark County Laois against comparable counties and regional centres, including indicators relating to employment density, enterprise activity, FDI performance, business births and survivals, commercial vacancy, productivity, skills, commuting patterns and economic output.

Spatial-Economic Assessment

Particular consideration should be given to the economic role, competitive strengths and development opportunities of Portlaoise, Graiguecullen, Portarlington, Mountmellick, Abbeyleix, Rathdowney, and other key settlements across the county, together with their relationship to wider regional economic corridors.

The Strategy shall include a spatial-economic assessment identifying:

- Strategic employment locations.
- Future employment growth corridors.
- Enterprise and industrial land requirements.
- Property market opportunities.
- Strategic town centre investment opportunities.
- Enterprise infrastructure gaps.
- Innovation and enterprise clustering opportunities.

The consultants should identify opportunities to develop a countywide spatial framework linking economic development priorities with land use planning, infrastructure delivery and investment attraction activities.

Economic Diagnostic Assessment

Undertake a detailed Economic Diagnostic Assessment of County Laois including:

- Labour market analysis
- Business base and enterprise profile
- Socio-economic profile
- Sectoral specialisation analysis
- Enterprise land and property assessment
- Retail performance and vacancy analysis
- Commercial property market review
- Comparative benchmarking against peer counties and national averages
- Assessment of future economic scenarios, global trends and disruptive forces including artificial intelligence, automation, demographic change, climate transition and changing work patterns.

Strategic Economic Development Priorities

The Strategy shall identify and develop a series of strategic priorities and recommendations to support sustainable economic growth, employment creation, investment attraction and enterprise development across County Laois, including consideration of:

- Opportunities for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), indigenous enterprise growth and strategic employment clustering.
- Frameworks for attracting and retaining high-value knowledge-based industries.
- Current and future workforce requirements and measures to address skills shortages.
- Positioning County Laois as a leading location for investment, enterprise and talent attraction.
- Opportunities to establish second-site investment locations for businesses seeking growth opportunities outside Dublin.
- Measures to reduce outbound commuting and increase local employment opportunities.
- Entrepreneurship, innovation and start-up development.
- Town and village regeneration, commercial vitality and vacancy reduction.
- Public and private investment opportunities.
- Strategic partnerships between education providers, industry and enterprise support agencies.
- Sustainable rural economic development.
- Innovation ecosystems, digital infrastructure and research-industry collaboration.

Deliverables

Core Deliverables

The appointed consultants shall provide:

1. Economic Development Strategy 2027–2031

Including:

- Vision and strategic direction.
- Policy Alignment Matrix showing how the strategy aligns with national, regional, and local strategies
- Economic Baseline, Diagnostic Assessment and Scenario Modelling: The strategy shall include a comprehensive economic baseline and diagnostic assessment of County Laois, incorporating demographic, economic, land use and infrastructure analysis, together with SWOT and sectoral profiling. Building on this evidence base, the consultants shall develop low-growth, baseline and high-growth economic scenarios, assessing the potential implications for population growth, employment creation, enterprise development, commercial floor-space demand and future employment land requirements.
- Sectoral analysis.
- Spatial-economic framework and GIS based maps showing key zones for development, innovation corridors, transport infrastructure, and land activation areas.
- Strategic priorities and actions.
- Risk and Mitigation Assessment: Identification of key economic risks, constraints and external factors that may impact strategy delivery, together with proposed mitigation measures and contingency considerations.
- Investment and Enterprise Recommendations: A set of actionable recommendations to support indigenous enterprise growth, inward investment and sustainable employment creation, informed by comprehensive stakeholder engagement, including workshops, consultations and feedback from business, community, public sector and educational stakeholders.

- A phased Action Plan setting out short-, medium- and long-term actions, including timelines, lead and supporting stakeholders, resource requirements and potential funding sources.
- Governance and Delivery Framework: A practical implementation framework setting out governance arrangements, delivery responsibilities, funding opportunities, resource requirements, key performance indicators and a phased programme of short-, medium- and long-term actions. The framework shall identify lead and supporting stakeholders for each action and include mechanisms for annual monitoring, reporting and mid-term review to ensure effective delivery of the Strategy.
- Monitoring, Evaluation and Performance Framework: A clear framework comprising KPIs, baseline indicators, targets, reporting templates and review mechanisms to support the ongoing monitoring, evaluation and refinement of the Strategy. The framework should facilitate evidence-based decision-making, annual reporting and periodic assessment of strategic outcomes and delivery progress..

2. Employment Land Assessment

Detailed and comprehensive Employment Land Assessment of County Laois in accordance with the OPR Practice Note PN04

3. Executive Summary Document

A concise and professionally designed summary document outlining the key findings, strategic priorities, recommendations and implementation actions arising from the Strategy, suitable for distribution to elected members, stakeholders, businesses and the wider public.

4. Stakeholder Engagement Report

5. Economic Data and Evidence Base

6. Communications, Engagement and Presentation Materials

In addition to the core strategy deliverables, the successful consultant shall prepare a suite of presentation, communications and engagement materials to support stakeholder engagement, decision-making and public dissemination of the Strategy.

Presentation Materials

Professionally designed presentation materials suitable for a range of audiences and settings, including internal workshops, Strategic Policy Committee meetings, Council briefings, Management Team presentations, public consultation events, strategy launch activities and investor engagement opportunities.

Infographics and Visual Communications

A suite of high-quality infographics, data visualisations and visual summaries presenting key findings, strategic priorities, actions and economic insights in a clear and accessible format for public engagement, stakeholder communications, digital platforms and media use.

Stakeholder Engagement and Presentations

The successful consultant shall develop and implement a comprehensive Stakeholder Consultation and Engagement Plan as part of the project methodology. The plan should outline the proposed approach to stakeholder identification, consultation, participation and feedback mechanisms and demonstrate how stakeholder input will inform the development of the Strategy.

The consultant shall be required to attend and facilitate a minimum of five formal meetings during the project, including:

- Two meetings of the Strategic Policy Committee.
- Three meetings with the work group – Head of Economic Development /Forward Planning team
- One briefing with Elected Members of Laois County Council.
- One meeting with the Management Team of Laois County Council.
- The successful consultant will be required to present the final draft strategy and recommendations to Elected Members of Laois County Council prior to adoption.

The consultant may also be required to facilitate additional workshops, focus groups, stakeholder consultations or presentations where considered necessary to support the successful development and adoption of the Strategy.