

Community Development Programme makes its mark

by: **CAROLINE ALLEN**

FROM helping the longterm unemployed, one parent families and those with disabilities to get jobs to engaging marginalised men through soccer street leagues and running after-school programmes and Glee youth clubs, Laois Partnership Company's Local and Community Development Programme has had a busy year.

It works to reduce social exclusion among individuals and communities. Programmes for unemployed, low income residents; early school leavers; one parent families; young people; foreign nationals; Travellers; older people and other marginalised groups, are organised.

"We zone in on key skills shortages in the locality such as IT, and devise packages that are usually funded by the Department of Social Protection, to make people more employable," said Catherine Cowap, Social Inclusion Manager, Laois Partnership Company. "Areas covered have included security, warehousing, horticulture and care of the elderly."

New businesses

Last year the programme worked with 164 people who were interested in setting up new businesses, supporting 47 of them into self-employment. The LCDP set out to engage with 150 unemployed people last year, and exceeded this, dealing with a total of 236. Ninety-five of these engaged in training and 24 progressed into employment.

While the main focus is providing supports to people seeking employment, it organises a wide range of activities in partnership with other agencies. Summer street soccer leagues and community coaching are run in conjunction with the FAI; Laois Sports Partnership; Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB); the HSE; Gardai; Department of Social Protection; and Laois County Council. This is a hugely successful programme with over 120 men, including 20 Traveller men taking part every summer. One participant, Jason Bergin, travelled to Poland during the summer to represent Ireland in the Street League World Cup.

Men's sheds

The programme engages with community groups around the county, pinpointing issues of concern, working to address them through joint action between policy makers, providers and local communities. One

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Rosaleen and John Fairbrother prepare for the opening of their adventure farm. (Photo: Annie Holland)

€200,000 Lisduff Adventure Farm opens

Laois Partnership Company grant-aids Errill attraction

THE county's newest visitor attraction, Lisduff Adventure Farm, outside Errill village, was officially opened on October 27 with 3,000 people present. Rosaleen and John Fairbrother are behind the E200,000 venture which has been grant-aided by Laois Partnership Company.

Set on 150 acres of land, divided into an organic suckler farm, an extensive forestry

by: **CAROLINE ALLEN**

plantation and a bog, the adventure farm is the latest addition to the family's enterprises. The family home on the farm, already incorporates a childminding facility.

The idea for the adventure farm stemmed mainly from the childminding business, according to Rosaleen Fairbrother. "We noticed an opening in the market for children's summer camps and a lack of

adventure activity-based opportunities for children and families," she said. "Laois Partnership Company offered valuable financial support as well as advice at every stage of the project."

The Fairbrothers believe that the adventure farm's proximity to two motorways and its midlands setting makes it easily accessible

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Opening day: Michael Bergin, Chairman of Laois Partnership Company with Chris Horan, board member and Chris's grand-daughter, Ava, at the opening of the refurbished bridge in Clonaslee. The work was grant-aided by Laois Partnership Company.

Laois Partnership Company grant-aids Errill attraction

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from any part of the country. Numerous obstacles had to be overcome along the way and the project was more extensive than originally envisaged, Rosaleen said.

Expansion

"This year we ran summer camps for children in our local area and they were a great success. This gave us the courage to try harder and a glimmer of hope on the future of this new enterprise," she said. "It also got us thinking about the future of the business and how we could expand it. In the future, we would love to develop into more adventure and educational activities for young adults and adults to utilise our extensive forestry. This could include walks; trails; adventure courses to incorporate wet land and climbing obstacles; go-karting, paint ball shooting; and bog snorkelling," Rosaleen said.

The Fairbrothers have started work of one element of the future expansion to be completed over the coming year. "We will be offering a challenge mud and obstacle laden course specially designed by C.A.M.P. - Cheshire Adventure Motivation Project, an official charity that provides outdoor challenges for people with high level of physical disability - to challenge those from a high level of fitness to

beginner, with proceeds of this going to C.A.M.P.," said Rosaleen.

Facilities include an indoor play facility which includes an obstacle course on split levels, slides, bouncing castles, ball shooters and cannon. "Our outdoor area consists of crazy golf; a pet farm with calves; a goat; sheep; pigs; a donkey; a pony; rabbits; guinea pigs; ducks and many other animals. It will also include a go kart area, play grounds, a mini farm, a pond, picnic areas and a barrel train," Rosaleen said.

Christmas activities

The Lisduff Santa train is booking out quickly. The first train will run on November 25 and trains will continue up to Christmas Eve. Lisduff Adventure Farm will open 51 weeks a year, seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. A coffee shop is part of the offering. "Our vision is one for families looking for entertainment for the children in a safe yet entertaining environment while adults can relax and enjoy all the



amenities," said Rosaleen.

Camps

The Fairbrothers will cater for school and pre-school tours. "We will be offering our birthday party experience to those booking birthday

parties. There will also be camps throughout the year including summer, Easter and Halloween. These will give children the opportunity to experience a real working farm as well as all the activities organised to keep them active and entertained," said Rosaleen. Packages for boys' and girls' brigades and scouts will be available. Facilities include shower rooms and changing rooms.

The festive spirit will be strong at Lisduff Adventure Farm, with Santa in situ throughout November and December. The Santa experience will feature a Santa train; a polar express route through the woods encountering all the farms features

en route to the Santa cabin where Mrs Claus and all the working elves will meet and greet. Children will then get to meet Santa Claus, get their photo taken with him and receive a gift. They can then play indoors at the coffee shop while parents stock up on festive foods. □

Laois Partnership key to Mountmellick hostel opening



Eugene Conroy checks progress on the development of The Forum hostel.

A MOUNTMELICK man is in the process of redeveloping the town's old Presbyterian Church and Manse into an €250,000 tourist hostel, with a grant from Laois Partnership Company. The hostel is scheduled open next March.

Eugene Conroy who is currently based in London, has ambitious plans to draw people to Mountmellick from the large Diaspora of Irish people around the world including those whose family originated in the area.

Accommodation with a difference

Development works are currently underway on the former church and Manse, with full planning permission and heritage approval now in

place. "The old church, rapidly descending to a point beyond repair, provided an ideal opportunity to develop accommodation with a difference," said Eugene.

The hostel's main target groups will be walkers and cyclists. Both walking and cycling are rapidly developing into the largest social activity in the Irish and British markets, according to Eugene. "The UK used to be one of the largest visitor groups to holiday in Ireland as there are strong Irish communities scattered throughout the UK."

Well placed

Mountmellick, he said, is well placed, both historically and geographically, to take advantage of the nearby Slieve Bloom Mountains; rivers; lakes; gardens; and other attractions around the county. "More importantly its biggest attraction is its people and the local hospitality extended," he said.

The idea for a hostel came from Eugene's experience, travelling and working abroad. "I have used hostels as a cheap but meaningful place to stay. Most members of the hostel community share a common outlook on life; have fun; and keep things simple," he said.

Facilitating disabilities

The new hostel will initially cater for 22 people with one room dedicated for people with disabilities, accommodating either two people with disabilities or one disabled person with their carer. There are four other rooms, varying from twin rooms to eight-bedroom bunk bed accommodation. Dining accommodation will be incorporated.

Ample car parking has been provided, with space for four camper vans. The plan is to register the hostel with Safe-Night Ireland.

The project couldn't have got off the ground without the support of Laois Partnership Company, which provided €150,000 towards the cost, Eugene said. □

Just the job

ESSENTIAL DIY jobs are carried out for older people by Laois Services to the Elderly People, sponsored by Laois Partnership Company's Community Partnership Programme. The initiative, which has been running in the Portlaoise areas since October 2008, takes people off the live register for two-and-a-half days a week, and matches them with elderly people who need maintenance work carried out at their homes.

"This includes cutting grass; painting; cleaning gutters and windows; power washing yards; clearing out sheds; cutting hedges; and taking rubbish to the dump," said manager, Sean O'Gorman. "We can't take on big jobs. The rate is about €15 an hour and we also have preferential rates arrangements with plumbers and electricians," he said.

There is huge demand for the service, according to Sean. "Our people are on the go the whole time. We have four workers at present and have some people from the Tús programme involved also."

"The value to older people is more than monetary. A relationship of trust is built up - the participants are Garda vetted - and they enjoy the interaction with our workers. It allows them to remain independent in their own homes for longer," Sean said. "You need to be a certain type of person to be involved - people skills are a must, and our participants love working with the older people," he said.

"They get the chance to do some part-time work and get some training and the older people know the lads so well at this stage, that they love to see them calling," said Sean. "We're hoping to build on this by setting up a volunteer service where people could call into elderly people, just for a chat." □

Tús scheme gets longterm unemployed working

THE 110 participants on the current Tús programme in Laois are working in a variety of roles, from charity shop assistants to assisting sports groups and cleaning up graveyards. Laois Partnership Company has been running the programme locally, since it was introduced in June 2011.

The participants are selected from a random sample of Department of Social Protection longterm

unemployed listings and some have gone on to find jobs as a result of the work experience. They work for nineteen-and-a-half hours per week in places such as the Dunamaise Theatre, Portlaoise; the Stradbally allotments; and Ballybrittas Tidy Towns.

Under the programme, the participants become employees of Laois Partnership Company which provides mentoring and training as well as work placements. □

Food for thought

MICHAEL Bryan was longterm unemployed after working in construction for a number of years. He commenced the Tús scheme in October 2011 working with Laois Sports Partnership as a coach and organiser of minority sports.

He spent a year on the scheme and being located on Portlaoise Leisure centre he saw an opening to apply for the contract to run the coffee shop in the centre. He had as part of the Tús initiative completed a HACCP course for food handling and felt that this was something in which he could become involved. He is now operating a limited company and has employed two people on a part-time basis. Michael feels that the Tús scheme gave him a sense of confidence and self-belief again. □



On the tiles

BRIAN Flynn was a tiler by trade who suffered because of the recession. He started on Tús with Portarlington GAA in October 2012. He went on to study Arts in Abbeyleix Further Education Centre. Brian hopes to go on to the University of Limerick. The Tús programme was instrumental in his decision to return to education. □



Players in one of the highly successful street leagues that took place during the summer.

Community Development Programme makes its mark

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Portarlington. Assistance has been provided to the Rathdowney Men's Shed and Portlaoise Men's Shed. Ageing with Confidence programmes in conjunction with the HSE and Age and Opportunity have also been run throughout the county.

Minority groups

The voice of minority groups, including Travellers and foreign nationals, is encouraged. Laois Partnership Company is a member of Laois Traveller Interagency Group.

Laois Partnership Company, in conjunction with Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board and Respond Social Housing, provides English conversation programmes for foreign nationals twice weekly under the Fáilte Isteach programme.

People with disabilities are also a focus. In the past year, Laois Partnership Company provided outreach programmes to encourage integrated living.

Promoting health

As a member of Laois Mental Health Collaborative group, Laois Partnership Company was involved in Laois Connects, a week-long programme of activities, which took place earlier this year.

In a bid to encourage a healthy lifestyle, the Food and Health programme, run in conjunction with the HSE, delivers healthy eating programmes to groups throughout Laois and Offaly.

For many years, Laois Partnership Company has promoted the benefits of volunteerism and in November 2012, Laois Volunteer Information Service was set up, in conjunction with Volunteer Ireland, to provide volunteering opportunities for people living throughout Laois. A website www.volunteerlaois.ie was launched simultaneously.

Residential works

Laois Partnership Company sponsors a Department of Social Protection-funded Community Employment

Project with 25 participants. They assist with the running of after-school programmes in St Brigid's Place; O'Moore Place; and Birchgrove, Portlaoise. They also provide support in crèches in O'Moore Place and Birchgrove. Both the after-schools and the crèches are managed by Laois Partnership Company under the Local and Community Development Programme.

Community Employment participants also work with residents in Lakeglen; O'Moore Place; St. Brigid's Place and Knockmay to maintain and improve their environs, including landscaping and main-taining community centres. St. Brigid's Place Community Centre was refurbished recently to accommodate residents with an office.

Pilot project

A new programme for one parent families which is run in conjunction with Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board the Department of Social Protection; the HSE; and Laois Sports Partnership, is proving successful in several local authority estates. It aims to improve parenting skills and reduce early school leaving.

Following the pilot project, both DEIS schools in Laois reported a 100 per cent increase in school attendance for the children involved. Sixty per cent of the mothers went on to take part in adult certified education with the Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board and 40 per cent are now working part-time. Two participants managed to stabilise their drug addiction and are now completing a programme with the HSE's Community Alcohol and Drugs Services.

Music sessions

Other support for young people include the establishment of Glee Clubs, set up in conjunction with Music Generation Laois. They provide weekly music sessions to young people in Kiln Lane, Mountrath; Mountmellick Youth Development Centre; and Portlaoise Youth Café. □

A word from the Chairman

IT gives me great pleasure as Chairman of Laois Partnership Company to welcome you to our newsletter. It gives you a flavour of what Laois Partnership Company has been doing on behalf of the people of County Laois since its beginning in 2008.

Laois Partnership Company delivers a number of programmes on behalf of the National Government and the European Union to the population of County Laois. These include the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 and the Local Community Development Programme; the Tús labour activation programme; the Rural Social Scheme; a Community Employment scheme; the Community Childcare Subvention scheme; Laois Services to Elderly People; and the Walks Scheme for Laois and Offaly.

I think it is fair to say the Laois Partnership Company has been in every parish and every town in County Laois and has offered some form of support in some way to all of those places.

The Board of Laois Partnership Company is a voluntary board with all the members living in the county. The Board seeks to deliver the best service for the county through the programmes offered.

The newsletter is just a flavour of some of the project in which we are involved. There are too many to mention individually. It is also important to stress that Laois Partnership Company does not work alone. A number of groups and organisations partner with us to deliver the actions in our strategies. We are indebted to the community groups in the areas, the Local

Authority; Department of Environment Community & Local Government; the Department of Social Protection; Laois Offaly Education Training Board; the HSE; FAS, and OPW to name but a few.

We have a number of schemes where individuals require placement with a group. This could not happen without groups and individuals being willing to supervise people and to ensure they have the best experience with the organisation. The groups involved range from GAA clubs to Tidy Towns Associations to charities and community development organisations.

We thank you all for your support and acknowledge that backing here in this newsletter.

A number of private companies offer participants on some of our training programmes work experience over the course of their training. This is not always easy but we have found that local companies, both large and small, have taken it upon themselves to support our trainees and for that we are grateful.

The staff in the company deliver a large number of programmes through dedication to their jobs. This can be seen in the quality of the programmes we are delivering. Please read and enjoy this newsletter. I hope you get something worthwhile out of it and you will identify where the Partnership Company can be of service to you or an organisation to which you belong.

Michael Bergin
Chairman



The Board of Laois Partnership comprises:

| | | |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Michael Bergin | Farming Pillar | Chairman |
| Peter M O Neill | Social Inclusion Rep | Vice-Chairman |
| Michael Cobbe | Emo Electoral Area Community Rep | Treasurer |
| Pat Culleton | Enterprise Board Rep | Board member |
| Michael Lalor | Elected Member Rep | Board member |
| Tom Mulhall | Elected Member Rep | Board member |
| Lisa Delaney | Elected Member Rep | Board member |
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| Chris Horan | Rural Development Rep | Board member |
| Paddy Buggy | Community Forum Rep | Board member |
| Liam McEvoy | Business Rep | Board member |

About Laois Partnership Company

LAOIS Partnership Company is the local development company for Co. Laois. A State and EU funded organisation, it delivers a range of programmes and supports to people, communities and businesses in the county. These programmes aim to make Laois a better place to live in by enhancing community life, combating disadvantage and social exclusion and supporting enterprise development.

Company background

Laois Partnership Company was formed as a result of a cohesion process. This was part of government policy to streamline the delivery of services to communities and groups throughout the country.

A limited company, it has 24 director positions, filled

from prescribed sectors or pillars. These include state agencies; local government; community and voluntary; and the national social partners.

The overall mission is to contribute towards the improvement of the social and economic circumstances of targeted individuals, groups and communities in Laois by implementing rural development and social inclusion programmes.

Initiatives include: the Rural Development Programme; Lo-cal and Community Development Programme; DSP Job Club; CE scheme; Tús programme; Rural Social Scheme; Services to the Elderly Programme; two FÁS local training initiatives; national childcare schemes; the Back to Education initiative.

The company's catchment area is the whole of Laois. However, it delivers the Walks Scheme for Laois and Offaly and the HSE funded Food and Health initiative for Laois and Offaly. □

Laois Partnership funds Gathering momentum



A step ahead: A group of French walkers who visited Abbeyleix as part of the Gathering with Ann Lanigan, Rural Recreation Officer.

LAOIS individuals, communities and businesses have embraced The Gathering - a government-led initiative aimed at encouraging the Irish diaspora and its network of connections to visit Ireland this year, according to Liz Kennedy-Burke, Laois Partnership Company's Gathering Animator.

Training

Liz, who has been in the role since last February, facilitates individuals, communities and businesses to organise Laois gatherings. She also organises and conducts training, research projects and networking support for the event organisers.

By the end of the year, almost 100 events will have been held locally to coincide with The Gathering Ireland 2013, said Liz whose year-long appointment is being funded by Laois Partnership Company. One of the flagship events was the inaugural James Fintan Lalor School held at Dunamais Theatre, Portlaoise in September.

Heritage happenings

Laois gatherings have ranged from Irish music and dance festivals to clan gatherings; special sporting events; heritage happenings;

class reunions; and walking and cycling initiatives. Many have caught people's imagination such as the Durrow Scarecrow Festival; The Irish Forestry Woodland & Bio Energy's Irish Lumberjack Show and musical get-togethers, with more lined up before the



Busy schedule: left to right, Carol Stanley, Kathleen Flynn and Kathleen Culleton taking part in the 'Ireland Reaching Out' training.

County reaches out with array of events

end of the year.

Sample

A sample of Laois gatherings that have taken place to date include the Gathering at the Gandon Music event; Woodenbridge Paddlers' Annual Raft Race; Clonaslee Ladies Reunion Ball 2013; the 20th Half Door Club Music & Set Dance Festival; May Bank Holiday Steam Trains; Irish Forestry Woodland and Bio Energy Show 2013; the Gordon Bennett Irish Classic Car Run; Laois Fleadh Cheoil - Ratheniska Comhaltas; 1895 Club - Abbeyleix Golf club; the Ballagh Cycling challenge; Laois Walks 12th Annual Festival; Festival Francais de Portarlinton - the Welcome Home; The Ard Eireann Festival; The Way We Played - Rathdowney Playground Group; and Rediscover Your Heritage Mountmellick - A Tapestry of History.

Emigrants

The Festival Francais de Portarlinton tapped into the huge number of young Irish people who have had to emigrate in recent years when they invited the Tir Chonail Gaels and other GAA teams home from England. A special part

of the opening night was dedicated to welcoming the players home. □

Laois lightens up for Christmas

LAOIS will look a whole lot brighter this festive season thanks to the lightbulb thinking of Laois Partnership Company.

In 2011 the board advertised a grant scheme for community Christmas lighting committees to upgrade to LED energy-efficient lighting. The project aimed to utilise new technologies to provide sustainable energy options for local communities and to promote the benefits of environmental upgrade projects to community groups.

Switching to LED energy efficient lighting requires significant capital investment. A grant of 75 per cent was offered to eligible community groups. Eight community groups availed of the grant scheme.

Borris-in-Ossory Development Association received grant aid for three lengths of LED white lighting for the town Christmas tree and LED white tree-lighting for six trees located at the Millennium Fountain.

Upgraded

Ballyroan Hall Association got grant aid to purchase and install LED cables, bulbs and outdoor transformers. This project has completely upgraded the Christmas lighting display on the village green to LED energy-efficient lighting.

Portlaoise Christmas Lights Committee bought and installed a selection of LED energy-efficient street lighting, including flasher bulbs, icicles, snowfalls tree sets, curtains and motifs for Main Street and some side streets, including Hinds Square.

Abbeyleix & District Lions Club purchased 60 sets of LED tree lighting to include 100 ice white LED bulbs and one outside transformer for every set. They will decorate Main Street.

Portarlinton Christmas Lights Committee availed of grant aid to purchase four LED energy-efficient Christmas scenes for all four entrances to Market Square. Portarlinton Traders Christmas Lights Committee bought 1,100 metres of LED clear lighting for Main Street and French Church Street.

Energy savings

Mountmellick Christmas Tree Committee received grant aid to invest in 800 metres of multi-coloured LED energy efficient lighting to decorate its Christmas tree at O'Connell Square. Mountmellick Festival Committee bought LED energy efficient Christmas lighting for the town centre, along Patrick Street and Parnell Street.

All the community groups have reported significant savings in their energy bills. The decreased energy requirement has also allowed some groups to reduce the number of meter boxes required to drive their lighting project, and this has resulted in even further savings. The success of these environmental improvement projects will, Laois Partnership hopes, encourage community groups to be pro-active in future sustainable and renewable energy initiatives. □

The call back home

LINKING with the theme of The Gathering Ireland 2013 in attracting overseas visitors and Irish diaspora is the 'reverse genealogy' initiative called Ireland Reaching Out or 'Ireland XO'. This involves tracing the descendants of those who emigrated from Ireland and encouraging them to return.

During the year, Laois Partnership Company supported training in genealogy,

built heritage/archaeology and biodiversity as part of 'Ireland XO'. The training included a visit to Donaghmore Famine Workhouse and a walking tour of Abbeyleix Heritage town. As a result of the success this initiative, Laois Partnership rolled out a second set of training programmes in Mountmellick in October. A Laois Partnership 'historic graves' programme which started in September will continue into the New Year.

Given the huge investment in training and marketing support for Laois Gatherings in 2013 and the enormous level of community contribution to ensure they were and continue to be a success, Laois Partnership Company will provide additional support to festival organisers during the last quarter of this year. This will help to ensure the continuous and further development of a strong festival and events sector in Laois. □



Laois Partnership Company gives food producers a taste of success

THE county is getting a slice of the action when it comes to the artisan food market, thanks to the support of Laois Partnership Company, which has funded an array of specialist food producers over the years. Helen Gee of G's Gourmet Jams and Abbey Farm Foods enjoyed a taste of success at tables around the country thanks to support of Laois LEADER Rural Development Company – now Laois Partnership Company through the Rural Development Programme – which got the Ballypickas business off the ground in 1999. The enterprise continues to thrive, thanks to the current support of Laois Partnership Company, which is funding the installation of a cooling tunnel.

Errill-based Api Chocolate has also benefited from Laois Partnership Company funding. Started in 2010 by Maria Lukacova who is originally from Slovakia, it specialises in handmade truffles, fudge, macaroons and bars.

Supportive

“Laois Partnership Company was very supportive from the outset, giving me funding, advice and ideas. The team there has helped me grow the business,” said Maria who works from her kitchen, which has been kitted out to HSE standards. As well as having family members helping out, she currently has one part-time employee. She hopes to take on more workers as the enterprise grows.

Rossmore Farmhouse Icecream is run by Rebecca and Aubrey Stanley from Rathdowney. “We started making icecream in June 2006 and



Dominic Leonard who has been approved under the Rural Development Programme to devise an open farm visitor centre and farm shop in Durrow.

mainly supply hotels and restaurants in Laois, and some in Dublin, Rebecca said. Wedding favours have accounted for a significant part of their business this year.

Their raspberry sorbet won a Blas na hEireann award last year. Featured in the Bridgestone Guide, they are also affiliated to Good Food



Ireland.

Rossmore Farmhouse Icecream started with the help of a capital grant from Laois LEADER, now Laois Partnership Company and has received further funding for marketing.

Natural

The Stanleys have ten core flavours but they are happy to create any flavour and they also make ice cream cakes to order. “We use absolutely no artificial flavours. We make our own honeycomb and caramel and the milk comes from our own cows. Our aim is to keep the ice-cream as natural as possible,” said Rebecca.

Award-winning Coolanowle Country House and Organic Farm in Ballickmoyler on the Laois/Carlow border, now incorporates a new function room, funded by Laois Partnership Company. Coolanowle Country House which featured in the RTE programme ‘At Your Service’ also received funding for its on-site farm shop from Laois Partnership Company.

Kelly Lou’s bakery enterprise alongside Gings Homevalue, Kealew Business Park, Portlaoise, has recently received funding from Laois Partnership Company. Kelly Lou Ging, who opened a retro style coffee shop at the family business in June 2012, got a grant for a bakery at the back of the shop, which allows it to expand its product in fresh cream cakes. “Having a commercial kitchen means we can sell fresh cream éclairs, roulades and take more orders for personalised cakes,” Kelly Lou said.

Seasonal

Dominic Leonard and his wife Alison Duck who are organic farmers at Castlewood, Durrow,

have received funding from Laois Partnership Company to open a farm shop. The premises is part of their efforts to develop an open farm with walks, guided tours, and children’s activities.

“We will sell our own meat products. We grow some fruit and vegetables and will supplement that in the shop with other locally grown seasonal produce as well as cheese and other products,” Dominic said.

Professional

Helen Gee’s initial funding from Laois LEADER saw the production facility completed to a professional standard, allowing G’s jams to be stocked locally and at farmers’ markets, including Temple Bar, Dublin. After a lot of hard work, which involved more markets and lots of weekend work, Helen saw her product move onto the shelves of independent shops as well as Tesco, Dunnes’ Stores and Supervalu under the Abbey Farm range.

New markets

Her award-winning range has also made it to Fortnum & Mason in England, as well as to Food Ireland, an online business in the United States. Helen would like to increase her presence in both



A piece of cake: Kelly Lou Ging.

the English and American markets. “All the time, we are looking to new markets. The business has grown year-on-year, even in recession as we have a quality product” says Helen.

Helen is upgrading to BRC global standards, a leading global safety and quality certification programme. Her ongoing efforts to raise the bar in the business are rewarded by the winning of lots of awards, the latest being a Great Taste three stars 2013 accolade for her gooseberry jam.

“The support of Laois Partnership has been invaluable in starting and expanding the business,” said Helen. □

Crafty types . . .



Members of Laois Partnership Company's craftworkers' group: Gertie McEvoy of 'Working with Wood'; Mary Stack of Slate Creations; Mike Delaney of 'Name on a Grain'; and Rebecca Stanley of Rossmore Farmhouse Icecream.

Working their way up

THE next Laois Partnership Company – supported Career Options programme will start in December. Providing training to unemployed men and women, it aims to help them gain greater personal development and identify specific career paths that will facilitate their progression into employment, self-employment, further training or education.

On completion of the 32-week programme, participants achieve a Level 4 Fetac major award in Employment Skills. Modules covered include maths; communications; word processing; career

planning; work experience; customer service; teamwork; personal effectiveness; and workplace safety.

According to Michelle Tierney, programme co-ordinator, the thinking behind the programme is to help participants develop achievable career objectives; create a personal job-seeking toolkit; gain an understanding of what is involved in further education, training or employment; and participate effectively in work experience in their chosen field.

There are 14 places on the programme and participants are recruited through the FÁS gateway. □

Emo Court horticulture course a growing success



Busy at work as part of the comprehensive organic horticulture local training initiative.

SET in the two-acre walled garden of Emo Court, the organic horticulture local training initiative has helped the career paths of 45 participants to date. Laois Partnership Company is the course's sponsor company, with funding from FAS, the Department of Social Protection and Laois Offaly Education and Training Board. Use of the garden has been facilitated by the OPW.

Visible impact

The FETAC level five course which is aimed at the longterm unemployed, has had a visible impact on both Emo Court and those taking part, according to Eileen Kenna Quinn, co-ordinator. "When we started here three years ago, it was just a blank canvas - the garden hadn't been touched in 30 years," she said. "Since then pathways have been reinstated using OPW guidelines, and a polytunnel erected. The students designed and built a netted fruit garden; developed vegetable plots; and planted a 90 m herbaceous border."

Work experience

Delivered five days a week, the course involves a mix of indoor and outdoor work. There are nine modules covering all aspects of horticulture and work experience. One day a week is spent on computer tasks. Fifteen people completed the course at the end of August and another fifteen started in September.

Covering everything from seed to plate, the course involves a mixture of practical work, written assignments, projects and exams. Three

past students have just finished first year of their degree course in Dublin's Botanic Gardens.

"Others have gone onto level six related programmes including the level six nursery stock course in the Botanic Gardens", Eileen said. "One past student has gained employment with Mount Venus Nurseries, Rathfarnham, Dublin, and was involved in the design and build of their award-winning garden at the Bloom festival this year. One of the students this year has already secured an internship with an organic grower in Kilkenny."

Opportunity

It's a fantastic opportunity for the participants, many of whom would have been interested in horticulture previously, but would not have considered that they could have made a living from it, said assistant co-ordinator, John Kelly. □

'The economic downturn has brought a new focus on supporting local producers, and the emphasis on food traceability should also boost the students' chances of finding work in horticulture.'



Working the great outdoors: Some of the participants in the course that finished in August 2013.

Music to the ears



Hitting a high note: Paul Higgins, Cúil Beat.

LAOIS musicians are hitting a high note, turning their talents into small enterprises. **Paul Higgins** from Coleraine has just gone into business making cajons, supported by Laois Partnership. The cajon, he said, is a miniature drum kit in a box favoured by buskers, as it is easier to carry around than standard drum kits. In Abbeyleix, **Joe Walsh** is training to be an uilleann pipe maker with Na Piobaire Uilleann in Dublin, also with the backing of Laois Partnership. When he finishes the three-year course, he too plans to start his own business.

Snowballed

Paul won several All-Ireland prizes for his bodhran playing over the years. The leap into setting up his own business came about after identifying a difficulty in sourcing cajons.

Having realised he could make his own cajons he saw there was demand from other musicians for them. "It snowballed from there. Then I was asked by Ryan Sheridan to make one for him. I've also made some for De Dannan and Celtic Women's tour of Japan."

Endorsement

This endorsement helped Paul sell into shops and subsequently seal a deal with Music Maker on Dublin's Exchequer Street after last Christmas. "They are instrument

distributors and they asked me to work with them on the manufacture of cajons, I supply them with four different designs," he said.

Paul also sells to the public, with personalised cajons in demand. "The cajon has become more popular because unlike the bodhran or drum, you don't really need to be particularly co-ordinated or skillful to play it. You can teach yourself to play it and become quite accomplished fairly quickly," he said. "I have got a lot of positive feedback, especially through my Facebook page, Cúil Beat Cajons."

Funding from Laois Partnership has helped Paul kit out his unit at Portarlinton Enterprise Centre. "I have one part-time employee at present and would love to be able to make them full-time. I expect Christmas to be extremely busy." □

IN Abbeyleix, Joe Walsh, who had been self employed in IT, is also hoping to carve a career out of his new venture, uilleann pipe making. "I had always been interested in uilleann pipes which I only started to learn to play a couple of years ago," he said. "I love working with timber and a number of years ago, I made a harpsichord."

Joe started the course in April 2012 and is enjoying it for its challenging and varied nature. "Uilleann pipe making isn't so much a complicated process but it does require different skillsets such as woodturning, metal turning and brazing. The course is broken down in modules covering not just the practical aspects, but also learning the theory of acoustics. It also incorporates design and drawings, the decorative elements in pipemaking and proportions," he said.

Having been told that there is a strong demand for uilleann pipe makers, Joe plans to start his own business in Abbeyleix when he finishes the course. "Some of the really good pipemakers are very long established and have waiting lists of many years. The order book of one pipemaker I'm aware of is closed." □



Pedal power: Bob's Bar, one of the local businesses that has complemented the initiative.



Unveiling history: Donaghmore Museum, one of the heritage attractions in the area.

South Laois Tourism gets in the loop

A FEELING that South Laois had been “left out of the loop” sparked the development of a website – funded by Laois Partnership Company – highlighting the area’s amenities and facilities. “We developed the website in 2011 because we all felt in South Laois that we had been left out of the loop a bit despite the fact that we have lots of points of interest and attractions,” said Michael G. Phelan who chairs South Laois Tourism.

“We also felt that with all the movement online, that a website was needed to move with the times. We are also on Facebook, championing the undiscovered Ireland,” he said. “We had two Tús workers for twelve months, based at the Castle Arms Durrow, and they dealt with enquiries. They were also supplied by Laois Partnership Company,” he said.

Families

Cycle routes were devised, ranging from 8.6 km to 48.48 km. Shorter routes were marked out with families in mind, with start and finish points in Durrow, Ballinakill, Ballacolla and Cullohill. Longer routes take in Durrow, Attanagh, Ballinakill, Ballyouskill, Ballacolla,

Grantstown Lake, Cullohill, Cullohill Mountain and The Ballagh. Local businesses in Durrow and Ballacolla have complemented this initiative by hiring out bicycles.

According to Michael G., local hotels, guest-houses and shops have benefited as a result of the development of the cycle routes. “Since we introduced the cycle trails, we’ve had a huge amount of cyclists use them, which has benefited local businesses,” he said.

Business

“Last June we organised what is going to be an annual event – a 100k cycle in South Laois and North Kilkenny, funded by Laois Partnership Company. Called the 100k Ballagh Challenge, it took in the Laois cycle trail as well as part of the Kilkenny cycle trail. It incorporated Cullohill, Rathdowney, Ballacolla, Ballinakill, Castlecomer, Ballyragget, Lisdowney and Gathabawn,” said Michael G.

“The inaugural event went very well, attracting over 145 cyclists and bringing

business to the area,” he said. “In April, we had 2000 people walking on Cullohill mountain for the John Murray walk. The RTE radio presenter launched two brochures, which were funded by Laois Partnership Company. The first

was a tourism and heritage guide, which highlighted the amenities, attractions and businesses in the area. The other was on the cycling and walking trails in South Laois and North Kilkenny, showcasing 15 cycling, walking and canoe trails. John Murray’s visit was filmed by the RTE television programme, Nationwide, and shown the following week.”

An 18 km linear walk, linking the Durrow leafy loop, Cullohill Mountain and the Gathabawn loop, the Mac Giolla Phádraig Way, has also been developed. “Our guided walks have proven to be a real attraction,” said Michael G.

Looking ahead, the group hopes to take part in the RTE programme ‘Tracks and Trails.’ “We’re aiming to highlight all our canoeing, fishing walking and cycling amenities.

Waterways

“Even though Laois is an inland county, there are lots of waterways around us, including the Nore, the Erkina, The Goul and The Gully as well as Grantstown Lake, a 24 acre lake with an artificial island in the middle of it, which is just off the M8 motorway, at junction three,” he said. Laois Partnership Company is funding an additional five fishing stands on Grantstown Lake under the Rural Development Programme.

“The lake is 25 ft deep and is regarded as one of the best coarse fishing lakes in Ireland and in Europe. Many continental visitors come to the area to visit it and there are lovely walks around it,” said Michael G.

“We started to promote all the attractions of South Laois. There’s huge interest in promoting all the facilities we have. Over the last two years, great progress has been made as a result of developing all the routes which are way marked and signposted. That has created opportunities for local business,” he said. “It has been great to see so many Irish visitors and tourists use the facilities we have developed in the area, all thanks to Laois Partnership Company through the Rural Development Programme.” □



Child's Play: At the opening of Clos Cloigthi playground, Timahoe, earlier this year. Timahoe is just one of a number of locations around the county to be funded over the years by Laois Partnership Company for playground facilities.

Job Club offers free service

DO you have a vacancy and don’t want to advertise? Laois Partnership Company can help. It has a client base of people well qualified and looking for work and can put businesses in touch with individuals who will fit their needs. This is a free service to employers.

Laois Partnership Company also offers a service to unemployed people who wish to find work. The Job Club is a Department of Social Protection-funded programme delivered in Portlaoise by Laois Partnership Company.

The Job Club is a four-week programme, running five mornings a week from 10am to 1pm, with a tailored schedule every morning. Every Job Club participant who completes Laois Partnership Company’s four-week

programme will have the skills to submit a CV and letter of application to any prospective employer. They can also avail of a mock interview where they are provided with constructive feedback.

For those who can’t avail of the four-week programme, Laois Partnership offers a one-to-one external service. This is where the participant meets with the Job Club Team to discuss their individual requirements. Assistance can range from simply applying for a job online; interview preparation; compiling an effective CV; and submitting an appropriate letter of application.

The aim of the Job Club is to enable all those taking part to plan, actively seek and achieve work opportunities in a relaxed and friendly training environment. □



Tim Doran with one of the stone walls he restored.

Farmers clean up

HAVE you ever driven past the Money Tree at Clonenagh and pondered who maintains the graveyard there? All that mowing and strimming is done by people taking part in the Rural Social Scheme. An income support initiative for farmers, it has been run by Laois Partnership Company since 2005. At present there are 25 participants from the county, with a waiting list.

Those taking part are working on a variety of projects from stone wall building at Annatrim Church and Emo to maintaining Portnahinch, Clonenagh and Ballyadams graveyards, all with the blessing of National Monuments. Others are working at Donaghmore Famine Museum; the Cuisle Centre, Portlaoise; and GAA clubs. □



Graveyard training at the Ivy Graveyard, Mountmellick, a Laois Partnership Company project.

Restoration project underway at Donaghmore museum

WORK is underway on the restoration of the original dining hall within the Donaghmore Famine Workhouse complex. The project, which has received €500,000 funding from Laois Partnership Company, is expected to take twelve months to complete.

According to Trevor Stanley, Museum Secretary, visitor numbers are up this year. "We normally get 2,500 visitors a year and this year, that looks set to increase. The various exits off the motorway bring in a lot of people. The signage is excellent, particularly at Borris-in-Ossory. The tourist office and hotels also send people interested in visiting a unique local attraction our way," he said.

Many tours incorporate a visit to the Donaghmore workhouse. "We recently had a visit as part of a famine tour organised by Mountmellick Heritage Society. We get school tours and visits from active retirement groups, and locals bring visiting relatives here," said Trevor.

"Most of the original workhouse buildings are still there. The museum is contained in the boys' and girls' dormitory buildings," he said. The provision of a museum on-site was spearheaded by a local committee in 1986.

The museum tells the story of the families who lived and died within the famine workhouse walls before, during and after the Famine. It uses guided and self-guided tours as well as exhibits to explain the conditions that led to the establishment of this and other workhouses.

The current restoration project came about as a result of an



The weight of history: Helen McEvoy and Eoin Fortune at Donaghmore Workhouse Museum.

invitation by the local authority for local agencies to visit the site and suggest ideas for development there. "The dining hall was adapted in the 1930s to make butter and assemble milk. It then lay idle from the 1970s, so the building will be renovated and reconfigured," said Trevor.

"The museum interprets the workhouse story and also has an agricultural and household collection. When the dining room is restored, it will allow us to interpret that story more professionally. It will also provide a large space for exhibitions and other projects," he said.

"The support of Laois Partnership Company has been invaluable through the funding but also through the provision of two Tús workers and two workers from the Rural Social Scheme involved with us at this historic amenity," he said. □

Walking the walk

LAOIS now benefits from an array of walking trails, the majority of which were developed in partnership with the communities and landowners, including Coillte. The partnership approach and community involvement are seen as critical to the success of the walks. The force behind the co-ordination of all the partners in the county is Ann Lanigan, Rural Recreation Officer with Laois Partnership Company.

One of just twelve rural recreation officers in the country, Ann's job includes ensuring that the Slieve Bloom Way and Offaly Way are maintained for walkers' use. She also looks after the development of new walks with local communities; promoting walking in Laois and Offaly; and managing the walks scheme in both counties.

Upgrading

Over the past few years Ann, with funding from Laois Partnership Company's Rural Development Programme has helped South Laois Tourism develop cycle routes around Durrow, Cullahill and surrounding areas. She is working with the Portarlinton Community Development Association to deliver a new walk around Derryounce Lake in Portarlinton. She has also undertaken extensive work on upgrading the Offaly and Slieve Bloom Ways to ensure more off-road walking and to attract more serious walkers to the midlands.

As part of the Gathering, she was involved in promoting the Laois Walking Festival to French walkers, visiting Pay Calais in May to promote the festival and to build on linkages made over the years with that region through the LEADER



Political point: Sean Conroy bringing former TD Liz McManus along the Leafy Loop, Durrow, for the Tracks and Trails programme.

programme. The visit culminated in twelve French walkers coming to Laois in July for the walks festival.

TV programmes

The promotion of activity tourism in Laois and Offaly is another aspect of Ann's work. She has worked with the producers of a number of TV programmes to attract more visitors. Among the programmes she has liaised with are Tracks and Trails and the Abhainn programme on the River Barrow.

Ann works closely with The Rural Social Schemes in Laois and Offaly and also with the Community Employment schemes and farmer participants on the walks scheme to ensure that the walks are kept in good condition.

Several training programmes were also organised through the Rural Development Programme for communities in Laois and Offaly. A trails maintenance course was offered over two days for community activists and members of schemes who are involved in trail maintenance in Laois and Offaly. □



Trailblazers: Trails maintenance training in progress.



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