

**MINUTES OF SPECIAL MEETING OF DONEGAL COUNTY COUNCIL HELD ON
21ST FEBRUARY 2024 IN THE COUNTY HOUSE, LIFFORD**

C/66/24

MEMBERS PRESENT

Cllrs M Harley, Cathaoirleach, K. Bradley, C Brogan, T Conaghan, D Coyle, G. Crawford, A. Doherty, R Donaghey, D M Kelly, M Mc Clafferty, P Mc Gowan, G Mc Monagle, M Naughton, J S O' Fearraigh and B Sweeny.

Online: Cllrs L Blaney, P Canning, N. Crossan, T. Crossan, G Doherty, L. Doherty, N Jordan, J. Kavanagh, N. Kennedy, M.C Mac Giolla Easbuig, M. McBride, M. Mc Dermott, P Mc Garvey, J Mc Guinness, M Mc Mahon, and J Murray.

C/67/24

OFFICIALS IN ATTENDANCE

John Mc Laughlin, Chief Executive, Patsy Lafferty, Director of Housing, Corporate and Cultural Services, Meetings Administrator, Liam Ward, Director Community Development & Planning Services/ A Meetings Administrator, Michael Mc Garvey, Director Water & Environment, Bryan Cannon, A/Director Roads & Transportation, Eunan Quinn, Senior Planner, Paul Christy, Senior Executive Planner, Eamon Brown, Divisional Manager, Housing & Corporate, Linda Mc Cann, Homeless Prevention Coordinator, John Gallagher, Senior Engineer, Alana Green, Lorraine Arbuckle, Suzanne Bogan, Fiona Kelly, , Seán O' Daimhin, Rannóg na Gaeilge, Róise Ní Laifeartaigh, Rannóg na Gaeilge, Dónall Mac Giolla Chóill, Tacaíocht do Sheirbhísí Aistriúchain, Frances Friel, Communications Officer, William Colvin, Assistant Communications Officer, Anne Marie Crawford, Staff Officer.

Mr Liam Ward, Director of Community Development & Planning Services assumed the role of Meetings Administrator for the first half of the meeting in the absence of Mr Patsy Lafferty.

C/68/24

**ADOPTION OF THE DONEGAL COUNTY COUNCIL CLIMATE
ACTION PLAN 2024-2029**

Members considered the report circulated with the agenda in relation to the above.

Mr Michael Mc Garvey, Director Water & Environment advised that the Plan sets out mitigation, adaptation, and other climate action measures, to help deliver on the national climate obligations and the Government's overall National Climate Objective, which seeks to pursue and achieve, by no later than the end of 2050, the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich, environmentally sustainable and climate neutral economy. He noted that pursuant to Section 16 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, notice of the preparation of the Donegal County Council Draft Climate Action Plan 2024- 2029, was given on 9th November 2023. Submissions with regard to the Draft Plan were invited from 9th November to 8th December 2023. Submissions with regard to associated environmental reports (Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment) were invited from 9th November to 21st December 2023.

He advised that in accordance with the requirements of the Climate (Amendment) Act 2021, the Chief Executive's Report summarised and detailed the outcome of the Public Consultation process on the Draft Climate Action Plan: As a result, he confirmed.

- 20 submissions were received.
- Feedback was positive.
- No material changes were made.
- 31 minor modifications to wording of plan text and numbering of actions 1 change to Objective NE 1 - "Protect, enhance and restore County Donegal's Biodiversity and Heritage, where possible or where feasible".
- 1 change to Objective BE6 - Increase the resilience of our Built and Archaeological Heritage to climate change".

The Cathoirleach outlined the importance of the Plan going forward and the implications of same for future generations.

Members congratulated all involved in the preparation of the Plan.

The Director of Service acknowledged the engagement and feedback from the Elected Members. He noted that under Section 14(B) 10 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment Act) 2021 the Local Authority could at any time review or amend the plan. It would, he confirmed, be monitored on an annual basis and there would be an opportunity to consider any relevant feedback through the SPC process.

On the proposal of Cllr Sweeny, seconded by Cllr Brogan it was resolved to adopt the Donegal County Council Climate Action Plan 2024-2029, having considered the Draft Plan, the contents of the Chief Executive's report on submissions received during the period of consultation and the SEA and AA Reports and determinations, carried out in accordance with the requirements and regulatory provisions of the SEA Directive (DIR 2001/42/EC) and Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC) pursuant to the provisions of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 as it amends the principal Act of 2015.

C/69/24

COUNTY DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2024-2030 - NOTE AND CONSIDER THE CONTENTS OF THE REVISED ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT, NATURA IMPACT REPORT AND STRATEGIC FLOOD RISK ASSESSMENT REPORT IN RELATION TO THE PROPOSED MATERIAL ALTERATIONS AND APPROVE THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE STATUTORY CONSULTATION PROCEDURES IN RELATION TO THE PROPOSED MATERIAL ALTERATIONS

Members considered the report circulated with the agenda in relation to the above.

Mr Liam Ward, Director Community Development & Planning Services

advised of the following:

- At the Special Plenary Council Meeting held on the 6th of February and the 12th of February the Elected Members resolved to amend the Draft County Donegal Development Plan (in accordance with S.12(6) of the Planning and Development Act 2000(As Amended) including amendments which, if made, would be material alterations to the draft plan.
- The Planning Authority subsequently determined that Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) was required in respect of said Proposed Material Alterations in accordance with S.12(7) (aa) of said Act, has carried out SEA of said alterations and has prepared a revised Environmental Report (ER) accordingly.
- The Authority has also carried out an Appropriate Assessment (AA) of said Proposed Material Alterations and a revised Natura Impact Report (NIR) has been prepared accordingly.
- Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) of said Proposed Material Alteration has also been carried in accordance the requirements of publication The Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities (DoEHLG 2009) and a revised Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Report (SFRAR) has been prepared accordingly.

The reports outlined above it was noted had been circulated to the Members for their information.

On the proposal of Cllr Coyle, seconded, by Cllr Mc Monagle, it was resolved to approve the commencement of the statutory consultation procedures in relation to the Proposed Material Alterations as set out above having considered the contents of said revised reports.

Mr Liam Ward, Director Community Development & Planning Services responding to a query from Cllr Mac Giolla Easbuig confirmed that the Environmental Report on the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment related to the material alterations that the members agreed on the 6th and 12th February and were not specific to the entire flooding issue on the coastline.

In respect of the query from Cllr Murray, he stated that the public, would now be invited to make submissions on the material alterations agreed at the Special Meetings on the 6th and 12th of February to include issues such as N56 Road Access, Rural Housing Policy and t Wind-Energy Policy.

C/70/22

HOUSING PRESENTATIONS AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

The Chief Executive informed member that there would be two presentations, one dealing with Affordable Housing and the other Homelessness.

He noted that the Special Meetings dealing with housing issues specifically had been extremely useful. There was, he advised a strong housing team in place and progress was being made on a number of fronts.

Mr Eamon Brown, Area Manager, Housing & Corporate in his presentation gave an overview of the current Local Authority Affordable Housing Scheme. Details in relation to the affordability aspect and the qualification guidelines were provided. He cited a number of examples based on current mortgage criteria.

Members were informed that it was intended to carry out an Affordable Housing Expression of Interest Survey to gauge the level of interest and problems being encounter by those trying to get on the property ladder. Details were also provided in relation to the proposed publicity strategy that would be used to promote same.

In conclusion he alluded to the following:

- Donegal was not included in the current Affordable Housing Scheme
- The proposed survey offered an opportunity to demonstrate demand and need in specific MD's or Towns
- The survey would collate data and a report would be prepared.
- Findings would then be reviewed with the Elected Members- Housing & Corporate SPC.
- If demand/need established – a submission would be submitted to the Department for consideration of Scheme.

Ms Linda Mc Cann, Homeless Prevention Coordinator updated members in relation to Homeless Services in Donegal. She advised that the key challenge at present was service users staying longer in homeless services due to the lack of private rented accommodation / HAP properties, together with the lack of affordable rents and mental health addiction issues.

The key priorities were, she advised to progress the Homeless Prevention Service within the Council led out by a new Officer as Homeless Prevention Coordinator.

It was intended also, she added, to establish and develop the role of HAP Placefinder and to provide a lead role to other agencies providing wrap around services to service users.

Going forward, she said that it was intended to look at temporary tenancies through the Shared Accommodation & Transition Home Models.

An overview of the key objective of the Homeless Prevention Team was provided and reference made to the initiatives/ support services that would be put in place to prevent homelessness backed up by the Tenancy Sustainment services. This it was confirmed would be further augmented by utilising all available services with the aim of progressing to housing.

Concluding it was noted that an action plan was now in place and that there was an understanding of the issues involved. Structures were in place, it was confirmed, to roll out the service and the Council had been proactive in establishing this new team with a primary focus on supporting the Housing Offices in each Municipal District.

A lengthy debate ensued, and members raised the following issues:

Issues Raised

Affordable Housing

- General welcome for the consultation process
- Affordable Housing must be spread evenly across the county.
- Little at present to entice contractors and developers.
- Serviced land initiative must be pursued and rolled out in a number of towns.
- Lack of property in Letterkenny for rent so therefore the need exists to encourage private sector investment in the market.
- Need for further co-operation with Udarás na Gaeltachta.
- Definition of affordability an issue and a range of incomes must be included if the scheme is to be affordable. Gap exists for those on moderate incomes.
- Houses must be built now to maintain the viability of rural Ireland and sustain rural settlements.
- People in rural Ireland who have a site should be accommodated. Safeguards should be in place to ensure that the problem is not exacerbated where this occurs.
- Expressed concern that the prices alluded to in the presentation are not realistic and are much higher than referenced in the presentation.
- Figure provided relate to second-hand houses. Need to look at the cost of incorporating new houses into the average figure.
- Needs to be a focus on real income figures.
- High rental costs preventing people from raising the required housing deposits.
- Concern that people who are selling houses to the Council must get an obligatory mica report yet in many cases the house is not bought.

- Housing needs along the N56 a clear challenge and costs excessive in terms of determining the viability of sites at these locations.
- Those who have demonstrated the ability to pay high rental prices should be allowed to use this as leverage and a means of offsetting the required deposit.
- Housing must be provided where the need exists and not just in towns.
- Young people constrained and are emigrating as they cannot get on the property ladder.
- Banks using redress basis for lending baseline thus inflating overall housing costs.
- New funding methods needed, and consideration given to a two-stage mortgage process.
- New direction and strategy required from the Department.
- Affordable Housing Scheme must bridge the gap between social and private housing.
- Extensions to Council Housing an aspect that should be explored.
- Anti-social behaviour an ongoing problem and not being adequately addressed by any of the housing models. Emergency back-up service needed.

Homelessness

- Resourcing and prevention the key elements in advancing the Homeless Action Plan and dedicated team in place.
- HAP supports are not enough to help those issued with termination/eviction notices. Tenant-in-Situ Scheme not meeting the prices landlords are looking for.
- True level of homelessness not readily apparent.
- To combat homelessness more houses needed, adequate resourcing and the use of modular housing, in specific circumstances.
- Partnership approach needed with the HSE and TUSLA. Addiction and mental health issues a massive problem. Effective wraparound service needed.

- Emergency accommodation spaces county-wide must be sourced, and shared accommodation options explored.
- Homeless Officer needed in each MD. Post in Letterkenny needs to be filled as soon as possible.
- Cap on rent needed at national level.
- Concern that 57% of the homeless population is in Letterkenny.
- Excellent work carried out by St Vincent De Paul and the Colmcille Hostel was noted.
- Issues arising where dependent relatives' names are not attached to tenancies even though they reside in the property.

Queries Raised

- In terms of equity is it the % borrowed at the start or the % of the market value when buying out the property?
- Why are blocks being procured only from one manufacture in the County at present?
- Why no mention of providing housing in villages and smaller rural settlements?
- Is there any allowance for the fact that income levels in Donegal are lower than other parts of the country?
- In relation to an Affordable scheme what are the conditions for resale?
- Is there an information deficit or wording that we need to include that convinces Dublin that Donegal is a special case?
- Has there been any increase in the demand to buy out social housing given the reduction in the minimum earnings criteria?
- In terms of the air to water heating systems is it correct that one machine is being specified?
- Vacant Property Grant, how many of the projects have been completed, and how many final payments have been made on same?
- Are there any statistics in relation to the numbers sleeping rough in Donegal?

- What is the main cause of homelessness and how can this be addressed?

Members requested that the following be matters be prioritised as a follow-up to the discussion:

- Invitation to be extended to the Banks and the Lending Agencies to attend a Housing Meeting so that feedback can be obtained as to where the hurdles are in terms of providing finance for Affordable Housing and to discuss finance options for prospective homeowners.
- Case to be made to the Department following the public consultation process in terms of amendments to the scheme. Results to be provided to the members.
- Detailed response in relation to the DCB supplier issue to be circulated.
- Statistical data on the Vacant Properties Grant to be forwarded to members.
- Homeless issue be addressed in workshop format in the various Municipal Districts.
- Suggested that the Construction Industry Federation be contacted about the general approach going forward.

Mr Patsy Lafferty, Director Housing, Corporate & Cultural Services advised that the public consultation process in respect of the Affordable Housing Expression of Interest survey would allow as much evidence as possible to be gathered and then the case could be made to the Department for Donegal to be included in the Affordable Housing Scheme. He noted that there were a number of initiatives out there such as “Vacant House Grant” Scheme which might offer a better alternative than the Affordable Scheme.

He informed members that details would be circulated in relation to concrete blocks manufacturers in the next week or so. There was, he added, no clear standard for blocks till the National Standards Authority concluded their examinations and provided updated standards the Council had to take a cautious approach in the short-term to minimise risk going forward.

Mr Eamon Brown, Area Manager, Housing & Corporate said that it was hoped that the survey would provide an accurate picture of where the affordable scheme needed to be targeted at. It was not envisaged, he said, that these would be large schemes but rather developments of up to four houses and that same could be provided by a private developer or an Approved Housing Body in locations where people wanted to live.

He informed members that,

- The potential existed for acquiring second hand homes.
- The need to have the banks and credit unions involved in the consultation process was noted.
- That the equity share would be based on the current market value at the time of redemption.
- There was no exclusion in terms of people who wished to return home to live.
- The data as presented was based on second-hand properties with only a small percentage of new homes included. It was hoped that the consultation process would provide more accurate information for the process and thus the submission to the Department would focus on new properties to get a scheme approved.
- Income thresholds were part of the national scheme and covered by the associated regulations.
- The 10% deposit is a national requirement.
- Property can be sold and resold, but the equity must be paid regardless.
- The publicity strategy would take in the whole county and would not exclude any town or village.
- Pobal Deprivation Index and the moderate-income levels in some areas would be taken into consideration, but that it would be necessary to wait on the feedback from the consultation process from which a possible recommendation might be to increase the affordable fund discount.
- Detail would have to be checked in relation to recent changes in the Tenant Purchase Scheme including the increase in the income threshold to €11,000.
- Scheme in Gweedore would be delivered with the assistance of Udarás na Gaeltachta.
- It was imperative that lessons are learned from the last affordable scheme and that households that have the ability to meet the scheme criteria. This will be strengthened by the public consultation process.
- Individuals during the consultation period would be asked to identify their preferred location with the aim of delivering affordable housing in areas where the demand existed.

Mr Liam Ward, Director Community Development & Planning Services confirmed that Donegal County Council had received 560 applications under the Vacant Homes Grant and that 340 were finalised with an approval rate of 94% and that a further 200 were being processed. It was important to note, he added, that the works had to be completed before the grant could be paid.

He said that the relevant detail in relation to the scheme would be shared with members.

Mr Patsy Lafferty, Director Housing, Corporate & Cultural Services alluded to the fact that members had endorsed the Regional Homeless

Action Plan a number of months ago and had highlighted at the time the importance of following up and implementing the objectives of same. Donegal had been, he advised, the first Council to seek approval for a Homeless Prevention Coordinator.

Several initiatives had been pursued, he advised, including a shared tenancy approach and the introduction of homeless prevention clinics. He acknowledged members comments in relation to the importance of maintaining an inter-agency approach and strengthening current working relationships.

He said that progress could be made by pursuing the initiative outlined above. It would be possible, he contended to have dedicated workshops at local level.

Ms Linda Mc Cann, Homeless Prevention Coordinator noted that there were issues with landlords not accepting HAP and that tenants had a fear of eviction if they reported issues to the Residential Tenancies Board. There were a number of supports for people in that situation, she added and said that anyone who found themselves in this situation should go to Citizens Information.

Responding to a query from Cllr Jordan she said that there were several reasons why people became homeless, namely the issuing of an eviction notice, anti-social behaviour, the landlord selling the property, non-payment of rent etc. For this reason, she outlined the need for wraparound services to help people in crisis situations.

The Chief Executive welcomed the informative presentations and said that they reflected the need to recognise the problems and adopt a shared approach to solving the problems. The proposal to bring in external agencies would also be useful, he added.

Members attention was drawn to the Housing Capital update circulated on the 20th of February and an outline of same was provided.

Mr Mc Laughlin said that members were well aware of the issues surrounding defective concrete blocks and the costs involved. It was important, he contended, that the mistakes of the past were not repeated. Blocks in the past, it was acknowledged, had been certified yet issues had still arisen. A new standard was awaited, he said, from the Government.

The Council, he advised, had gone with a stricter standard, which one quarry had met. Others, he said, should look at the standard issued and aim to achieve same. The Council, it was noted, were not experts in this field but were implementing the stricter standard in the short-term until the new national regulations were issued.

The Chief Executive confirmed that it was not about circumventing other suppliers but rather the need to protect into the future.

An update on the matter, he said, would be circulated in the coming days.

This concluded the business of the meeting.