

**MINUTES OF SPECIAL MEETING OF DONEGAL COUNTY COUNCIL HELD ON 11<sup>th</sup>  
OCTOBER 2023 IN THE COUNTY HOUSE, LIFFORD**

C/305/23

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Cllrs M Harley, Cathaoirleach, K. Bradley, C Brogan, P. Canning, T Conaghan, D. Coyle, G. Crawford, T Crossan, A. Doherty, R Donaghey, M Farren, N. Jordan, D. M Kelly, M Mc Clafferty, P. Mc Garvey, P. McGowan, M Mc Mahon, G. Mc Monagle, A Molloy, and M Naughton.

*Online:* Cllrs L Blaney, N. Crossan, G. Doherty, L. Doherty, M. T. Gallagher, J. Kavanagh, N. Kennedy, M.C Mac Giolla Easbuig, M. Mc Dermott, N Mc Garvey, J Mc Guinness, J. Murray, J.S. O' Fearraigh and B Sweeny

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**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, Bryan Cannon, A/Director of Roads & Transportation, Garry Martin, Director Economic Development, Information Systems & Emergency Services, Eamon Brown, Divisional Manager, Housing & Corporate, Donal Walker, Senior Engineer, Donna Mc Groarty, Area Manager, Housing Capital, Services, Claire Burke, Senior Executive Architect, Housing Capital, Jim Boner, Senior Executive Engineer, Housing Capital, Róise Ní Laifeartaigh, Rannóg na Gaeilge, Cliona Ní Ghallachóir, Tacaíocht do Sheirbhísí Aistriúchain, Frances Friel, Communications Officer, William Colvin, Assistant Communications Officer, Anne Marie Crawford, Staff Officer.

C/307/23

**COUNTY DONEGAL HOUSING ISSUES IN COUNTY DONEGAL.**

Mr Patsy Lafferty, Director Housing, Corporate & Cultural Services said that the meeting was a follow on from the discussion that had taken place at the September plenary meeting in relation to the housing situation in the county. Responses, he said, had been issued to individual members in respect of queries raised at that meeting. He informed members that a presentation highlighting various aspects of the housing delivery programme would be delivered by staff members from the Housing Capital team, and that afterwards there would be an opportunity for further discussion on the housing programme.

He introduced the following members of staff, who he advised, would be delivering, and commenting on individual sections of the presentation:

- Eamon Brown, Divisional Manager, Housing & Corporate
- Donal Walker, Senior Engineer
- Donna Mc Groarty, Area Manager, Housing Capital
- Claire Burke, Senior Executive Architect, Housing Capital
- Jim Boner, Senior Executive Engineer, Housing Capital

A welcome was also extended to the Municipal District Area Managers, Housing & Corporate who were in attendance.

The presentation covered the following aspects:

- Housing for All 2022-2026
- Housing For All Targets v Proposed Delivery
- Housing Need By Municipal District
- Programme for Delivery 2022-2026
- Resourcing
- Project Pathway
- Challenges to Delivery
- Addressing the Challenges to Delivery
- Land Acquisition
- Specific Housing
- Affordable Housing
- Homelessness

A lengthy debate ensued with members commenting and raising queries on a wide range of issues.

C/308/23

**ADJOURNMENT OF THE MEETING**

It was unanimously agreed to adjourn the meeting for lunch until 2.20pm.

C/309/23

**COUNTY DONEGAL HOUSING ISSUES IN COUNTY DONEGAL.**

A lengthy list of points were raised and questions posed as follows by members:

- Specific projects and locations were highlighted including Fire Station Stranorlar, Trusk Road Ballybofey, Killylastin Letterkenny, Oran Hill Letterkenny, Annagry, Milford, and Mountcharles
- Information sought on the development of Barrack Hill for other community non-Housing uses.
- Can follow up be carried out with residents of Carrick Fern affected by new housing development at Crana Crescent.
- When will Dept approve funding for the Council to fix its own vacant houses affected by defective blocks? Pressure needs to be brought on the Department regarding funding for the remediation of Council housing stock.
- Delays on the legal side are causing problems.
- Homeless - No homeless hostel or halfway houses in Donegal. Homeless vouchers are not the answer. Homeless vouchers should be valid for at least a week. Call for one to two houses to be bought in each MD and be made available for housing emergencies. Need to engage with other agencies, as Council cannot solve homeless issues alone.
- Projections for the delivery of housing units are ambitious, however concern expressed that this cannot be delivered.
- What is the Council's stance in relation to the provision of modular homes?
- Vacancy & dereliction - Legislation is there to deal with vacant homes and derelict sites. This needs to be utilised and availed of. More detail and intervention needed in relation to derelict sites in Ballybofey/

Stranorlar. Derelict property on Main Street, Ardara referenced. Unoccupied building in Ballintra has potential in terms of accommodation options. Empty buildings around the county should be utilised for accommodation purposes. Noted that old Garda Station in Bunbeg is up for sale and could be utilised for accommodation purposes.

- Crói Conaithe – concerns regarding the lack of available tradesmen and the 13-month window to secure a grant. Department need to be contacted about simplifying the Scheme and the introduction of a staged system of payment. Clarity to be sought as to whether farmhouses are included under the grant scheme. Ready to Build serviced site initiative needs to be progressed.
- Update requested on the Tús Nua Regeneration Project.
- Risks need to be taken with the Vacant and Derelict Properties and Town Centre First Schemes and consideration given to looking at using older buildings.
- Concern regarding condition of AHB properties in Stranorlar.
- Tenant Purchase - Should be an accommodation for persons willing to take on tenancy/loan for their elderly parents.
- Turnkey policy needs to be simplified for both the developer and the Council. The issue of lack of stage payments was highlighted. Too much red tape involved and delay in payments for contractors a factor also. What mechanisms are in place to shortlist turnkey proposals?
- SI Housing - Honest conversation needed in terms of S.I.s and whether the Council wants to build these types of one-off rural houses.
- Are the same delays/blockages experienced in other counties?
- Architectural issues must be taken into consideration and houses built to accommodate the changing need of their occupants. Use of standard design process could speed up the delivery process.
- Tenant in situ - What is the uptake county-wide for the Tenant-in Situ Scheme? Call for the Council to utilise the Tenant-in Situ Scheme to address the ongoing issue at Ballymacool in Letterkenny.
- Can a submission be included in respect of the low-cost rental scheme?
- Pace too slow in terms of land acquisition. Too much emphasis on securing the perfect site through the acquisition process. Do we know how much land we own throughout the county? Has an audit of lands been carried out? Land in Buncrana is available close to town boundary and should be looked at.
- Concern that only ten houses planned outside of Letterkenny Town. Milford EA going backwards and at the expense of Letterkenny. Houses need to be built in all smaller towns and villages.

- Income ceiling for access to social housing and to housing loans needs to be reviewed.
- Concern expressed that Donegal County Council had not been informed of the Minister's decision to defer the Residential Zoned Land Tax until January 2025, given the serious implications for housing provision in the county.
- Uisce Éireann water and sewer connection fees are exorbitant and warrant review.
- Regarding Defective Concrete Blocks checks and balances in new builds, what is the process?
- Planning objections can often hinder development. Additional resources needed in An Bord Pleanála to deal with these in a timely manner. Planning & zoning issues need to be addressed. Assessment of housing need must encompass all areas and be reflective of rural settlements. Need is biased in favour of specific towns and villages as planning policy negates against building in rural areas. Access to N56 a major problem in terms of private and S.I housing. What can be done to fast track the planning process for "Change of Use" applications? What incentives can be put in place to encourage development? Reduction or removal of planning fees one possible option.
- Additional staff required. Labour shortage needs to be addressed nationally. Request for listing of housing staff. This to include their roles and contact details together with information on any other role that they may carry out.
- Service Infrastructure - Call for traffic light system to be introduced in terms of progressing housing developments where the relevant infrastructure is in place, e.g., water, sewerage, footpaths etc.
- What conversations have been had with Uisce Éireann in relation to infrastructural priorities and the Council's own plan for building houses going forward?
- There should be a dedicated housing capital staff member in each MD.
- What efforts have been made to simplify the pathway for housing design and construction? Proposal that an independent view be sought as to how housing delivery can be speeded up.
- Monthly meeting needed so that updates can be provided on Housing issues. Statistics to be provided on the planned actions and an analysis of those delivered and those which failed to be delivered. Agenda to be guided by the executive.

Mr Patsy Lafferty, Director Housing, Corporate & Culture said that the presentation had given an insight into the processes and steps involved in the delivery of housing programme. The 161 separate projects alluded to in the presentation, he said, represented an ambitious target and would give rise to significant challenges now and in the future.

A key element of the plan, he noted, was the emphasis on land acquisition. Members were informed that monies had not yet been received for the two sites in Letterkenny. It was confirmed that the Department had recently introduced the Land Acquisition Fund and that the Housing Agency would pay and do the conveyancing for the Local Authority in respect of new land acquisitions going forward. This, he said, was a positive development with 8 land acquisition applications approved by the Housing Agency to date.

He said the CALF Funding model had not been successful in rural counties and that a new model had been introduced which the Approved Housing Bodies had indicated was much more attractive.

Mr Lafferty said it was not possible to make staged payments on turnkey projects, but that the Housing Capital office worked around this issue and had an arrangement whereby houses were taken from contractors on a phased basis, within new developments, where possible.

Members were informed that there was an inter-agency approach to homelessness and ongoing co-operation with the Health Service Executive, St Vincent De Paul, NW Simon, Donegal Domestic Violence Service, and other bodies. The Shared Tenancy Initiative, he advised, would also be of assistance here and would be rolled out to all Municipal Districts. Concluding, he confirmed, that issues were discussed at National Director of Housing meetings and that each county had its own specific challenges. The Defective Concrete Blocks Scheme was a unique challenge in Donegal particularly, he added, and presented difficulties for all concerned.

Mr Donal Walker, Senior Engineer, advised that an update on Stranorlar Fire Station would be presented to the Lifford/Stranorlar MD members. He said that a new turnkey advertisement had gone out on tenders and that it would be possible to have a workshop for developers with the intention of generating more interest in the process. The turnkey process it was noted facilitated the delivery of units at five or above. It was important, he added, that developers with land contacted the Council so that engagement could take place in relation to the turnkey process. Members were informed that Housing Capital met the Council legal team on a weekly basis in relation to the direct timelines and deadlines for such projects. The Gweedore Turnkey Project, he advised, was one of five Projects ready to go to the Council Solicitor for further instruction.

There was, he advised, ongoing and positive engagement with the Department in relation to the remediation of social housing impacted by mica, and that approval was awaited for a pilot project for 60 vacant homes. He alluded to the fact that preventative remedial work had been carried out on houses to date, where deemed appropriate, and as an interim measure until such time as they could be remediated permanently. It was confirmed that the Council would continue to support individual cases where there was evidence of definite deterioration, but that exchequer funding was needed to do repairs in a constructive manner.

Members were advised that it would be possible to follow-up in relation to the issues raised by the residents of Carrickfern in Buncrana.

It was noted that there had been a positive response from Uisce Éireann to infrastructural issues in Carndonagh.

Mr Walker referring to ongoing issues with turnkey sites in Carndonagh and Milford advised that there had been significant engagement with the developers concerned and that the door was open for further consultation.

The turnkey development in Carrigart, despite potential issues, it was acknowledged had been included as there was a willingness and impetus to drive the project forward.

Regarding the seven houses in Annagry, it was confirmed, that the developer concerned would be able to engage through the new competitive dialogue process.

Concluding, he said that there were robust checks and balances in place in terms of the blockwork and that a written report would issue to members in due course. Responding to the query from Cllr N Crossan, on modular homes, he confirmed that the Council was actively looking at the remediation of social housing and was open to looking at any options that expedited same.

Mr Eamon Brown, Divisional Manager, Housing & Corporate drew attention to the fact that there was a specific statutory notice period before someone could be evicted from their home. The emphasis currently, he advised, was on trying to prevent homelessness by working with clients and intervening as soon as possible after an eviction notice issued. There were, he confirmed, a range of support services in place to assist people who found themselves in this situation.

He outlined the fact that there were options to address same both within our own housing stock and through the "Tenant in Situ" Programme. For those who did not qualify for social housing there was also the Council home loan option.

He encouraged anyone who found themselves in this situation to attend the Homeless Clinics held each Tuesday and Thursday in the Public Service Centres.

Mr Brown stated that there was ongoing and positive interaction with St Vincent De Paul, and the NW Simon in all Municipal Districts.

The Shared Tenancy initiative, it was noted, was a new and innovative approach in dealing with the issue and allowed clients build up a history of tenancy.

The Tenant Purchase Scheme, he said, was governed by national policy with little discretion. This, he confirmed, was being reviewed and it was hoped to have an updated scheme in the near future.

It was acknowledged that there was a need to keep in contact with the Department regarding a policy review of the various housing options available. He said that there was a need for an overall review of the income thresholds for social housing, given that Donegal had been categorised in the lowest income band, and that this was clearly not working at present.

It was also confirmed that the turnaround times for the letting of casual vacancies is ongoing.

Cllr Mc Gowan alluding to the range of issues raised by members proposed that monthly housing meetings be held going forward to address and overcome the hurdles in delivering a robust housing programme. This was seconded by Cllr Brogan who highlighted the need for ongoing engagement with the public so that they could be fully briefed in relation to the fact that the Council has and will be open for business and that it was also willing to move forward on housing matters where the relevant infrastructure is in place.

Mr Liam Ward, Director Community Development & Planning Services said that Ballybofey/Stranorlar which had a consistently high vacancy rate was one of the nineteen towns prioritised to move forward to stage two of the Vacant & Derelict Properties Refurbishment Grant Scheme.

He informed members that 109 of the applications received in respect of the Croí Cónaithe Scheme were at the final stage of approval with 184 returned to the applicant for further information. 45 applications, he advised, had been received nationally with less than half of these approved to date. Of these it was noted that only 21 had been paid nationwide with the average time for dealing with each submission amounting to 78 days. It was confirmed that Donegal was operating well below this timeline and that efforts were being made to reduce the processing time further. He said that additional clerical and technical support had been brought on board to administer the scheme.

Regarding derelict sites, he said, that clarification had issued from the Department that there would be discretion in terms of the 13 – month deadline.

The Repair to Lease Scheme was only a runner, he advised if there was a demand for social housing in that particular area.

He confirmed that he would pass on to the Regeneration Team the request to have housing options included in Regeneration Plans going forward.

Mr Ward said that it was a fact that the influx of International Protection and Ukrainian Refugees had impacted on the available accommodation.

He said that it was his belief that farmhouses were included under the Croí Cónaithe Scheme, but that additional clarification would be sought on this

and Croí Cónaithe on whether or not properties without a roof were covered by the grant.

Alluding to several queries in relation to payments under the grant schemes, he said, that contact could be made with the Department seeking options if any for a staged payment method.

There was acknowledgement of the fact that the liability date for the Residential Zoned Land Tax had been extended until January 2025.

Responding to a query on the Tús Nua Regeneration Project, he said, that it was intended going forward to hold a workshop for the Inishowen members.

Concluding, he said that it would be possible to engage with the Banks in relation to vacant properties under their remit.

The Chief Executive informed members that it would be possible to engage with the Tenants and the owners of the properties at Ballymacool.

He thanked the members of the housing team for their detailed and informative presentation and acknowledged the attendance of the five Municipal District Managers. The "Housing for All" Programme was, he stated a significant and ambitious undertaking with an estimated budget of €320m up until the end of 2026. This, he noted, would involve a considerable amount of project management to deliver within the set timeframes.

He informed the meeting that the Council had been held back in terms of options for dealing with Defective Concrete Block houses and the subsequent lack of approval from the Department.

He cited the need for ongoing collaboration from all involved so that the necessary obstacles could be overcome, and the programme delivered in a timely and efficient manner. In terms of the discussion going forward, he advised of the need for a dedicated focus on specific housing topics.

Attention was also drawn to the fact that a specific delivery targets had been set for 2026 and that one-off housing would not have a major material impact on this target.

It was agreed that Special Meeting proposed earlier in the meeting by Cllr Mc Gowan and seconded by Cllr Brogan would be held on Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2023 in the County House, Lifford.

Mr Liam Ward, Director Community Development & Planning Services responding to a query from Cllr Mc Clafferty in relation to access issues onto the N56, said that following the recent meeting with the Oireachtas members correspondence had been forwarded to the Minister for Transport, Mr Eamon Ryan, T.D. requesting that he meet with a delegation from Donegal County Council to discuss same. A response, he said, was awaited in relation to the matter.



The Cathaoirleach thanked the Housing team, and all involved in the meeting for what had been a productive and informative discussion.

This concluded the business of the meeting.