

**MINUTES OF ANNUAL BUDGET MEETING OF DONEGAL COUNTY COUNCIL,
HELD IN THE AURA LEISURE CENTRE, LETTERKENNY ON 25th NOVEMBER,
2020**

C/228/20

MEMBERS PRESENT

Cllrs R Donaghey, Cathaoirleach, L Blaney, K Bradley, C Brogan, P Canning, T Conaghan, D Coyle, G Crawford, N Crossan, T Crossan, A Doherty, G Doherty, L Doherty, M Farren, M T Gallagher, M Harley, N Jordan, J Kavanagh, D Kelly, N Kennedy, M C Mac Giolla Easbuig, F Mc Brearty Jnr, M Mc Bride, M Mc Clafferty, M McDermott, I Mc Garvey, N Mc Garvey, P Mc Gowan, G Mc Monagle, A Molloy, J Murray, M Naughton, J O Donnell, J S Ó'Fearraigh, and B Sweeny.

Online

Cllr B Mc Guinness

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OFFICIALS IN ATTENDANCE

John Mc Laughlin, Chief Executive, Joe Peoples, Director of Housing, Corporate and Cultural Services / Meetings Administrator, R Gibson, A/Head of Finance, Brendan O' Donnell, A/Director of Roads & Transportation, Liam Ward, Director of Community Development & Planning Services, Michael Mc Garvey, A/Director of Water & Environment, Garry Martin, Director of Economic Development, Information Systems & Emergency Services, Tanya Kee, Management Accountant, Frances Friel, Communications Officer, Róise Ní Laifearaigh, Rannóg na Gaeilge, Anne Marie Crawford, Staff Officer.

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APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Mc Mahon who was unable to attend the meeting.

C/231/20

**CONSIDERATION OF THE 2021 DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET-
CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S ADDRESS, ADDRESS BY THE HEAD OF
FINANCE AND DIRECTORS OF SERVICE**

The Cathaoirleach welcomed Members to the meeting and said that in order to comply with the Covid-19 Meetings Protocol the duration of the meeting would be limited to two hours. She asked that contributions would reflect this.

Mr John Mc Laughlin, Chief Executive, outlined the key considerations on which the 2021 Draft Budget had been prepared namely:

- Upkeep of roads, housing & infrastructure
- Support economic development, job creation /retention and industry.
- Development of towns, villages and communities.
- Bids for state grants/external funding and provision of co-funding.
- Support initiatives for improving the North West region. (Brexit, Shared Island & NW City Region)

It was acknowledged that the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic had been particularly challenging for communities in general and that the fall out had impacted severely on businesses and the economy as a whole. The Council, it was noted, was central to the ongoing response and future support for these communities and the economy at local level.

The provision of ongoing Government support was widely welcomed.

Members were informed that every effort had been made to ensure that monies for roads and housing would be maintained in 2021 with an additional €700,000 provided in the form of a Tourism Support Fund. Other highlights it was noted were the increase in Housing Adaptation Grant co-funding to fund works to the value of €2.5 million and the creation of a dedicated Greenways development team. Other features such as the provision of co-funding for URDF/RRDF and other development projects together with the provision of a €100,000 Biodiversity Fund were also highlighted.

Mr Richard Gibson, A/Head of Finance, updated Members in relation to the legislation governing the preparation of the Draft Budget and the Three Year Capital Budget.

An overview of the financial issues for Income & Expenditure relating to balancing the 2021 requirement was provided including details of how the 2021 provision compared with 2020.

He highlighted also the main income and expenditure movements between 2020-2021.

A breakdown of the draft revenue expenditure for 2021 was presented to members on a service by service basis.

The Draft Budget, Mr Gibson confirmed provided for expenditure in the sum of €155,285,723 for the year ending 31st December, 2021.

He thus called on the Elected Members to endorse the following:-

- A harmonised rate of €71.81 for County and former Town Council areas of Letterkenny and Bundoran for 2021 with no general increase in rates for 2021.
- Establishment of a rate of €58.29 for the former town Council area of Buncrana for 2021.
- Vacancy Rate on Commercial properties- retention of the existing policy for 2021.

Details in relation to the continuation of a number of exceptional measures were outlined including the necessity to maintain a multi-annual approach so as to be in a position to match income with expenditure in 2021.

C/232/20

PRESENTATIONS BY DIRECTORS OF SERVICE

The Directors of Service outlined in detail the 2021 budgetary provisions as applicable to their respective Directorates.

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CONSIDERATION OF THE 2021 DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET

Cllr Brogan on behalf of the Fianna Fáil grouping thanked the Chief Executive, the Head of Finance and his team together with the Senior Management team for their efforts in producing a budget book given the current uncertainties. He acknowledged that there had been ongoing engagement with Mr Charlie Mc Conalogue, T.D, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and that funding of €10.5 million had been committed at national level to assist Donegal County Council with the rates deficit.

The 2021 provision, he noted, sent out a very positive message that Donegal was open for business. He welcomed the provision of €700,000 for a Tourism Support Fund which would, he said, help to build on the many successes to date and enhance the Donegal tourism brand even further.

There was acknowledgement also of the provisions for the footpath and lighting programmes, together with continued investment through the Development Fund Initiative. As a Council, he said, it was important that investment was made in the heart of local communities, a factor which had paid enormous dividends in 2020.

2020, he noted, had seen a number of initiatives progress, namely the Greenway initiative, the Defective Concrete Blocks Scheme.

Compliments were paid to all involved in the administration of the Business Support Scheme which had paid out €24 million to businesses struggling under the Covid-19 restrictions.

He advised of the need to maintain a focus on Brexit and that additional consideration was needed in respect of the following:-

- Legal services.
- The extent and range of the gritting programme.
- Need for increased provision in the area of housing services

Concluding, he said, that he would be happy to support the 2021 Draft Budget.

Cllr Marie Therese Gallagher, on behalf of the Sinn Fein grouping thanked all who had contributed to the 2021 budget process, noting that 2020 had been an extraordinary year, and one in which the Council had worked hard to ensure the continuation of the various works programmes. There was appreciation also of the time afforded by the Chief Executive and the Head of Finance to members prior to the publication of the 2021, Draft Budget Book.

She acknowledged the contribution of all those in the voluntary sector who in co-operation with Donegal County Council had worked tirelessly at local level to ensure that communities had access to all basic service provisions during the pandemic.

Acknowledging the fact that large sections of the local economy had been badly hit in 2020, she said it was imperative that people in Donegal shopped local this year in an effort to maintain vibrancy in our towns and on our main streets.

The Sinn Fein grouping, she said, welcomed the fact that there were no cuts to services in 2021 and that there had not been an increase in commercial rates. There was appreciation also of a number of positive developments namely, the setting up of the Greenway Development Team, increased provision and spend on the tourism product, further promotion of the North West City region together with the new RDF Programmes and supports provided to advance the Pollinator Plan.

Cllr Gallagher said that there were a number of issues that warranted further consideration going forward. These included

- The need to push for the development of rail services in the North West.
- The development of hydro-electric power which might help alleviate some of the concerns in relation to wind energy.
- Employment of a Disability Officer with cross service remit.
- Greater focus on the remediation of unfinished estates.
- Improved recycling facilities.
- Build a similar relationship with Omagh and Fermanagh District Council to that currently in place with Derry City & Strabane District Council.
- Need to retain and actively promote the “Buy Donegal Campaign”
- Development of a tourism brand that all Municipal Districts could buy into. Suggested creation of an iconic tourism brand such as the “Seven Wonders of Donegal” with locations selected on a rotational basis.
- Angling activities need to be promoted so as to tap into the considerable market for this type of activity.
- Additional investment needed in our piers and harbours.
- High level discussion needed at Government level regarding Irish Water. This to include an overview of service management, ongoing policy plans and details of future investment initiatives.
- Need to ensure that many of the cross-border initiatives undertaken over the last 20 years are not lost within the Brexit process.

She said that it was imperative that Donegal positioned itself centrally and called on the Cathaoirleach to engage with the European Commission in the New Year so as to promote and showcase the initiatives and progress made in respect of the North West City Region to date.

Cllr N Crossan said that whilst this had been a year like no other, nationally the Government had stepped up to the mark in terms of support, all of which had allowed local authorities to continue with their work. He alluded in particular to the Business Support Scheme.

He cited the importance of the continued promotion of Donegal as a premier tourist destination and the need for continuing engagement with the Diaspora. Industry, the fishing and agriculture sectors, he added, all needed a vote of confidence in light of the current Brexit scenario. The 2021 draft budgetary provisions, he contended, augured well for the people of Donegal and it was important that leadership was shown so that all Municipal Districts could benefit going forward.

Cllr Mc Bride welcomed the creation of the dedicated Greenways Team and advocated the development of a ten year plan for Greenways incorporating a number of natural routes throughout the County. It was disappointing, he said, that no monies had been allocated in the last tranche of Department funding. These projects, he advised, would fit in well with the various tourism initiatives and assist with the continued development of the tourism product.

Cllr Farren acknowledged that the past year had been very difficult and paid tribute to all those involved in frontline services for their dedication and commitment. He welcomed the funding for the ferry services in 2021 together with the Greenway initiatives. He acknowledged the excellent work carried out by the Mica team and of the need to ensure that adequate funding was forthcoming going forward.

Cllr Harley on behalf of the Fine Gael members said that the Draft Budget provisions were excellent given current circumstances. He thanked the Head of Finance, Richard Gibson and his team for their hard work and dedication. There was acknowledgement also of the input from the former Chief Executive, Seamus Neely, the current Chief Executive, John Mc Laughlin and the members of the Senior Management team.

He alluded to the uncharted territory ahead in terms of the full impact of Covid-19 together with the impending fallout from Brexit. The Business Restart Grant it was acknowledged had played a vital role in preserving jobs whilst the increased investment in the tourism product would allow the industry develop to cater for increased tourist numbers. The correct decision, he noted, had been taken earlier in the year to maintain the Local Property Tax at the same level thus enabling the preparation of a very positive 2021 Draft Budget.

The Greenways initiative, he added, would be a major boost for the Lifford-Stranorlar Municipal District.

He outlined the need to replicate the current working relationship with Derry City & Strabane District Council so that a similar initiative could be undertaken with Omagh & Fermanagh District Councils.

It was essential, he said, that the Council move forward with bye-laws in the area of casual trading so that a level playing field existed for all rate paying businesses. He highlighted the need for additional monies to support the Arts sector and those venues suffering as a result of the pandemic.

Welcoming the funding for the pollinator plan, he said that it was imperative that the Council embrace climate action and the green transformation.

He outlined the importance of regenerating and developing towns and villages across the county so as to maintain vibrant and living town centres.

It was acknowledged that there were access issues in terms of contacting Irish Water and that these needed to be resolved as soon as possible. He advised of the need to strengthen their teams on the ground with funding being a priority going forward.

Roads infrastructure, he added, was an ongoing priority in terms of bringing people into Donegal.

There was acknowledgement also that co-funding was vital for the Housing Adaptation Grants Programme.

Concluding he confirmed that the Fine Gael grouping were happy to support the 2021 Draft Budget as it afforded the best possible outcome for dealing with the challenges facing the County in 2021.

Cllr Mac Giolla Easbuig acknowledged that provision had been made for a number of essential and viable projects but said that he could not support the budget on the basis that adequate funding provision had not been made for the Glenties Municipal District.

He outlined a number of issues that required attention and which were being impacted by a lack of funding:-

- Road surfacing and the lack of gritting on specific roads.
- LIS allocations not sufficient to meet current demand.
- Lack of recycling facilities.
- Rapid Response Team needed within the Fire Service.
- No movement on the provision of rail services for Donegal.

- Lack of funding for the new boat on Tory.
- No provision in respect of the Pier at Arranmore.
- Little or no progress on the development of walkways in the Glenties area.
- Concern that obstacles were being placed in the way of those who wanted to return home and live in an in relation to planning.
- Responsibility for water and sewerage services should be returned back to Donegal County Council.

Cllr I Mc Garvey highlighted a number of areas for review. These included:-

- Flexibility needed for small businesses together with a review of the current rates system.
- Enterprise supports vital so as to encourage people to live and work in Donegal.
- Municipal Districts need to be in a position to borrow money so as to facilitate works at local level.
- Borrowing capability vital so as to be in a position to advance roads projects, promote tourism and to facilitate the need for additional housing.
- Multi-agency approach needed to advance the various housing programmes.
- Donegal County Council needs to support communities active in retaining rights over certain walkways/routes etc.

He cited the need to lobby at national level for additional funding for Donegal. It was important also, he added that cross-border co-operation was continued and built upon.

Cllr Donaghey proposed, seconded by Cllr Harley that the Annual Revenue Budget for 2021 be adopted.

The Cathaoirleach welcomed the level of preparation involved in the Council's Draft Revenue Budget for 2021, and in what she acknowledged had been a difficult year for all concerned. She acknowledged the work carried out by each Director of Service and their staff together with all those frontline workers who had battled to keep services and the economy open and available to all.

She acknowledged also of the many families whose lives had been severely impacted by Covid-19 and friends and colleagues who had battled the virus over the last nine months.

Particular tribute was paid to the Head of Finance whose continuous engagement with members had been widely welcomed together with the opportunities provided on a number of occasions to deal with member's queries. She thanked the Chief Executive, the Party Whips, the members of the Corporate Policy Group and the Minister for

Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Mr Charlie Mc Conalogue for their assistance.

Alluding to the €155.3m Draft Budget, it was heartening, she said, that there had been cross-party support for the 2021 proposals. A particular highlight, it was noted, was the fact that there had been no general increase in commercial rates for 2021 and that the monetary provision as outlined equated to an average daily spend of €425,440 or €975 per citizen over the course of the year.

There were, she contended a number of highlights within the €155.3m provision namely:-

- Repetition of the expenditure provisions for road maintenance and works to council houses – budget headings that were increased in recent years;
- The implementation of the long awaited MICA defective concrete block scheme;
- The introduction of a €700,000 fund for 2021 to develop tourism infrastructure and to help prime the tourism and hospitality sector to take advantage of the type of demand experienced during the 2020 summer period, with a particular emphasis on attracting ‘staycationing’ visitors to the County;
- The capacity to co-finance a number of important capital investment projects across the County, including URDF and RRDF projects, and the likes of Swan Park and the Inishowen Innovation digital hub in Buncrana;
- The creation of a dedicated Greenways Development Team to bring forward ‘shovel-ready’ greenway projects including the one from Buncrana to Carndonagh which will connect to the Derry to Buncrana route;
- A range of economic development measures across the County including initiatives to attract inward investment, promote Donegal products & services, and provide supports to existing businesses and start-ups;
- The introduction of a €100,000 Special Biodiversity Initiative, with a focus on addressing the actions of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan;
- Continued support for the ferry services;
- Maintaining the Council’s support for leisure centres, theatres, ferry services, cultural facilities, parks & open spaces, and flagship tourism destinations; and,
- Additional monies to co-fund housing adaption and mobility improvements in houses to provide for €2.5m of works.

Concluding she wished everyone a better 2021 and advised that the Council’s Community helpline was still in operation for those experiencing difficulties at this time.

On the proposal of Cllr Donaghey, seconded by Cllr Harley it was resolved in accordance with Section 29(8) of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 that the rate multiplier for the former Buncrana Town Council area be set at 58.29 for 2021 and that an appropriate Base Year Adjustment be applied to effect this.”

On the proposal of Cllr Donaghey, seconded by Cllr Harley it was resolved that Donegal County Council adopt for the financial year ended 31st December 2021, the Budget set out in Tables A and B, resulting in an Annual Rate in Valuation of 71.81 as shown in Table A and subject to Section 10 of the Local Government (Financial Provisions) Act 1978, having regard to the Base Year Adjustment, as set out in Table C, and determined in accordance with Section 29 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014.”

This concluded the business of the meeting.