

**MINUTES OF ANNUAL BUDGET MEETING OF DONEGAL COUNTY COUNCIL,
HELD ONLINE ON 25th NOVEMBER, 2021**

C/241/21

MEMBERS PRESENT

Cllrs J Murray, 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, R Donaghey, 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, M Naughton, J O Donnell, J S Ó'Fearraigh, and B Sweeny.

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OFFICIALS IN ATTENDANCE

John Mc Laughlin, Chief Executive, Patsy Lafferty, A/Director of Housing, Corporate and Cultural Services / Meetings Administrator, Richard Gibson, 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, Seán O' Daimhin, Rannóg na Gaeltachta, Róise Ní Laifearthaigh, 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/244/21

**CONSIDERATION OF THE 2022 DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET-
CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S ADDRESS, ADDRESS BY THE HEAD OF
FINANCE AND DIRECTORS OF SERVICE**

The Cathaoirleach welcomed members, the senior management team, the media and members of the public to the meeting. This, he said, was an ambitious and comprehensive budget which aimed to better the lives of the people of Donegal. Members, he noted, all had a significant input into the budgetary process at Plenary and MD level resulting in what, he said, was a member's led budget. The €162m revenue budget proposed was, he advised, the largest presented to date and amounted to expenditure of €1000 per man, woman and child in the county.

He thanked the Head of Finance and his team for their excellent work in what had been a difficult financial year.

Mr John Mc Laughlin, Chief Executive, outlined the key considerations used in the preparation the 2022 Draft Budget namely:

- Upkeep of Roads, Housing & Key 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)

He alluded to the fact there would be significant challenges ahead in terms of recovery from Covid-19 and the ensuing impact on the economy, together with the necessity to operate in a tightening financial environment. It was acknowledged that an increased emphasis would be needed on managing outcomes relating to the defective concrete blocks and the implementation of specific climate action measures. He advised of the need to progress with new work streams and projects, together with the maximisation of the “Housing for All” Plan.

The following, he said, were some of the highlights of the 2022 Draft Budget.

- Retention of a high level investment in roads and housing.
- The provision of €800,000 co-funding for URDF/RRDF tourism and other development projects.
- Delivery of the second phase of the Tourism Support Fund to the value of €700,000.
- Introduction of a €350,000 pilot fund for Council Housing Estate upgrades and the repair of infrastructure including back lanes.
- Continued focus on Greenways development and Active Travel.

Looking ahead, he advised of the need to target and avail of key investment opportunities. The aim, he said, was to support wider education, health and population growth for the region. It was imperative, he added, that there was a review of the workforce, planning delivery, the overall working arrangements and an effort made to control the overall base cost in terms of planning and investing for the future.

On this basis, he recommended, that members adopt the revenue budget of €162,303,721 proposed for 2022. He drew attention to the fact that commercial rates remained unchanged in 2022.

Mr Richard Gibson, Head of Finance, updated Members in relation to the legislation governing the preparation of the Draft Budget and the Three -Year Capital Budget including the statutory timeframes involved.

He noted that there had been considerable engagement to date in relation to the 2022 budgetary process and proceeded to highlight details of the main income and expenditure movements between 2021 and 2022.

Details of business supports provided in 2021 were outlined and it was noted that Government funding had been provided to fully offset the cost of providing Small Business Assistance Scheme for Covid (SBASC) Grants and the application of commercial rate waivers.

An overview of the financial issues for Income & Expenditure relating to balancing the 2022 requirement was provided including details of how the 2022 provision compared with 2021.

A breakdown of the draft revenue expenditure for 2022 was presented to members together with details of the designated sources of expenditure accompanied by a synopsis of the main sources of income in 2022.

The Draft Budget, Mr Gibson confirmed provided for expenditure in the sum of €162,303,721 for the year ending 31st December, 2022.

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 2022 with no general increase in rates for 2022.
- Establishment of a rate of €60.29 for the former town Council area of Bunrana for 2022.
- Vacancy Rate on Commercial properties- retention of the existing policy for 2022.

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 the required expenditure in 2022.

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PRESENTATIONS BY DIRECTORS OF SERVICE

The Directors of Service outlined in detail the 2022 budgetary provisions applicable to their respective Directorates.

C/246/21

CONSIDERATION OF THE 2022 DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET

The Cathaoirleach said that the budgetary proposals were excellent and that he would be happy to proceed with same.

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 challenges that existed. He acknowledged the excellent relationship that currently existed with the Oireachtas members and the fact that the Corporate Policy Group met with them on a regular basis.

He welcomed the provisions in general and advised of the need to continue with investment in the whole area of tourism. It was important, he advised given the huge undertaking involved that progress was

monitored and called on the Senior Management Team to examine the availability and amount of resources needed to deliver the projects in question. He cited the need for continued engagement with the OPW in relation to the clearance of rivers, watercourses etc and the implications for bridge maintenance. He asked that a dedicated team be put in place to progress this.

Going forward, he stressed the importance of investing in landbanks as a means of dealing with some of the many housing issues.

He proposed that additional outdoor staff be sought for the Roads Directorate and a more permanent arrangement put in place for temporary roads staff.

He alluded to the challenges presented by Brexit and the need for continued collaboration with our cross-border colleagues and the fact that Donegal needed to be at the fore in any Brexit Adjustment fund.

He complimented the Civil Defence Unit on their efforts in assisting with the Covid-19 pandemic and acknowledged also the huge amount of volunteerism county-wide that had been a feature of the overall response.

Cllr Brogan seconded the proposal by the Cathaoirleach to adopt the Draft Revenue Budget for 2022 and advised of the need for quarterly updates in relation to the financial situation in 2022.

Cllr Gallagher welcomed the fact that there had been considerable and inclusive engagement with members in relation to the 2022 provisions. She welcomed the ongoing works in relation to the Regeneration Programme and acknowledged the efforts of the Planning and Economic Development teams in this area. There was recognition also of the efforts being made to recycle soft plastics and the initiatives undertaken to promote further collaboration with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

Continued progress was needed, she advised, with regard to the Greenways programme and the North West City Region initiative. She asked that consideration be given to the following:-

- The deployment of Civil Defence to deal with gorse fires.
- Concerted effort made to deal with our emission targets.
- Review and implementation of a plan for public conveniences.
- Estate takeover and Unfinished Estates must be prioritised.
- The need for high level discussion at ministerial level in relation to the lack of capital investment in the county and the lack of engagement with the general public.
- The implementation of a new funding model for local government as the current system was failing Donegal, a county with the least disposable income in the country.

- Urgent consideration needed so that a dedicated practical emergency accommodation programme by municipal district could be put in place in light of the ongoing mica crisis.
- Continued input needed from the working groups established to address settlement issues in respect of the N56.
- Progression of the Planning Development and Infrastructure Plan for Letterkenny.
- Progression of Buncrana Leisure Centre.
- Community Development Officer needed in the Donegal MD.
- Standardised roads policy needed.
- Continued investment required in our offshore Islands.
- Funding issues in relation to An Gailearaí need to be addressed.
- Inshore fishing industry needs to be supported and developed.
- Sustainable income sources need to be explored.
- Feasibility study needed in relation to renewable energy so that long-term economic development can take place in the county.

Cllr Gallagher proposed that a meeting be sought with the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Ms Catherine Martin, T.D to address the shortfall in funding for the Donegal Community Stadium.

Cllr Harley welcomed the tribute paid in the Budget Book to the late Cllr Mc Guinness and the acknowledgement that the Council was seeking to deliver some local projects in his name.

He acknowledged the efforts that had gone in over the past few years in tourism development and advised that economic development was the way forward in terms of moving on from the Covid-19 situation.

He welcomed the €800,000 provision to co-fund the Regeneration Programme and noted that the future was bright in terms of the university status awarded to Letterkenny Institute of Technology and the strides being made to progress the North West City Region. There was acknowledgement also of the funding for Active Travel projects and the monies provided for older people's disabilities grants. He complimented the Local Enterprise Office on keeping businesses open during the pandemic and assisting those that were in a position to trade online.

The impact of the Town and Village Renewal Programme could, he said, be seen throughout the county.

There were challenges, he said, going forward and outlined the following:-

- The need for two fire stations in Ballyshannon and Bundoran remains unchanged.
- Rural water schemes need to be taken on board by Irish Water.

- Greater accessibility to Irish Water needed together with a review of ongoing charges.
- Ongoing Brexit issues need continual monitoring.
- Retrofitting of houses must be prioritised if energy and emission targets are to be met.

He proceeded to second the proposal from Cllr Gallagher that a meeting be sought with the Minister for Sport in relation to the Community Stadium and said that a reduction in the co-funding amount from 25% to 10% was required in order to get the project over the line.

Continuing, he seconded, Cllr Brogan's proposal for additional roads staff and the permanent appointment of a number of temporary roads workers. He was, he confirmed, happy to support the 2022 budgetary provisions. It was imperative, he said, that monies continued to be raised locally as strategic development depended on this funding source.

Cllr Nicholas Crossan on behalf of a number of the independent grouping acknowledged the fact that there had been many challenges over the past year. He called for a review of the rates system and for continued consultation with the business sector so that businesses would be better placed to trade and diversify in a changing economic environment. Ratepayers, he noted, were the backbone of funding for Donegal County Council. He acknowledged the excellent work carried out by the Roads division in the Inishowen MD and alluded to the fact that the Council was obliged to find a way to deliver on climate change.

He asked that consideration be given to the implementation of a pilot scheme in Donegal to assist local businesses and allow them to develop their full potential. Cross-border and cross-community collaboration was essential, he advised, if the county was to develop to its full potential.

He confirmed that he was together with a number of the other independent members happy to support the 2022 budget recommendations.

Cllr Farren outlined his support for the budget and paid tribute to Minister Charlie Mc Conalogue whose efforts had helped secure funding for the breakwater at Greencastle. He welcomed the funding made available under the Development Fund Initiative for smaller projects in the county, together with the provision for public lighting and the town and village initiatives.

He advised of the need for more dialogue with Irish Water together with increased infrastructure and funding for projects including pipe replacement county-wide.

Paying tribute to the Mica Action Group, he said that he hoped there would be a positive outcome in relation the 100% rerress. He cited also the necessity of ensuring that the ongoing accommodation crisis was addressed.

The need for additional focus on the agriculture and fishing industries was noted.

Cllr Mc Brearty advised that he was not in a position to support the budget as a number of serious issues had been overlooked and he alluded to systemic corruption. He noted that not all properties had been included under the Defective Concrete Blocks Scheme, ranging from leased properties to public buildings and that there had been no consideration of the fact that insurance policies and home bonds were still in place for many of these properties. He cited a number of examples and queried as to whether the concrete blocks had been tested in the new housing estate in Raphoe. Mica, he noted, was only part of the problem and issues were emerging daily in relation to the presence of other deleterious materials.

He asked if Irish Public Bodies had been contacted in relation to the problem and what protections there were in place to deal with those using such properties. The issue, he said, was not just confined to social housing and there were implications also for those who availed of Shared Ownerships, the Tenant Purchase and Affordable Housing Schemes.

A query was also raised in relation to the failure to provide a footpath adjacent to the ten new houses in Raphoe . He identified a number of other areas of concern namely:-

- Not enough enforcement staff in planning.
- Query as to who policed building control, market surveillance and planning enforcement..
- Called for all infrastructure in Donegal to be tested ranging from bridge walls, culverts, to footpaths, kerbing etc.
- Tourism in East Donegal is not getting the same attention as the rest of the county. The Castle in Raphoe and Beltany Stone Circle are examples of this oversight.
- No conclusive answers in relation the One Sigma Procurement issue and ensuing report.
- Detail requested in relation to the staff currently sitting on the legal services working group and their areas of expertise. Concern that elected members have not been invited to contribute to same.

Cllr Mac Giolla Easbuig said that he could not support the budget given the fact that the county did not receive enough money from central Government. He expressed concern in relation to the lack of funding for the Glenties Municipal District and that this had contributed over the

years to a lack of development in the west of the county. He outlined a number of specific examples of this infrastructural deficit including the failure to deliver a new ferry to Tory Island. He expressed disappointment at the following:-

- Inadequate staffing in the roads division.
- The failure to provide an adequate policy to deal with the need for emergency accommodation.
- Failure to build sufficient housing in rural areas and lack of maintenance of the Council's own housing stock.
- Under investment in water infrastructure.
- Insufficient support for An Gailearaí

Concluding he alluded to the fact that some staff members and councillors were looking after their own needs and that this corruption needed to be investigated.

Cllr N Crossan said that this was a serious accusation and if the Cllr in question had information then he should make it available.

The Cathaoirleach noted the seriousness of the allegation and that said that the claim would have to be substantiated if it was to be properly investigated.

Cllr Mac Giolla Easbuig said that in his opinion anyone who took advantage of their position was corrupt.

A heated exchange involving a number of members took place. Cllr Crossan proceeded to ask for a verbatim translation of Cllr Mac Giolla Easbuig's comments.

Cllr Naughton seconded the proposal by Cllr N Crossan that such throwaway comments were outrageous and unacceptable.

The Cathaoirleach informed members that the meeting was going nowhere with this continued interruption. Information was needed, he reiterated, if this claim was to be investigated. He cautioned against throwing out comments of this nature without any evidence and said that he had at no time had received any evidence regarding alleged corruption from Cllr Mc Brearty. He drew Cllr Mac Giolla Easbuig's attention to the fact that such off the cuff commentary would result in all types of allegations and insinuations against the members and staff of Donegal County Council being bandied about on social media. If the evidence was provided, he said, that he would personally look into the matter himself.

He outlined his intention to move on and allow Cllrs Mc Bride and I Mc Garvey deliver their responses after which a recorded vote would be taken on the 2022 budget proposals.

Cllr Mc Bride alluded to the chronic housing situation and said that it needed to be clarified whether or not the funding was sufficient to deliver the housing programme given the chronic housing situation in the county. He noted that time was not our side given the worsening mica problem and the fact that homelessness was now a major problem in the county. He cited the need for a Housing Workshop.

Cllr Mc Bride outlined his support for 100% redress for mica families and asked if the Department had put a plan in place for re-housing mica families. He acknowledged the provision made for the retrofit programme together with the €350,000 provision for back lanes.

He proceeded to advise of the following:-

- Concern re the lack of capital investment in Letterkenny.
- Water infrastructure in Letterkenny needs updating and further augmentation to cater for its expanding population needs.
- Retrofit Programme needs to be extended.
- Continued effort needed to address problems in Unfinished Estates together with the acceleration of the Takeover Programme.
- Must be able to build houses where there is a specific need.
- Need to enhance staffing in the roads areas.
- That public conveniences at beach locations needed to be kept open in some capacity over the winter months.
- Town and Village Renewal Programme an important driver for the tourism industry in Donegal.
- Lack of Caravan and Camping Facilities must be addressed.
- Letterkenny Institute of Technology an important asset to Donegal and when university status granted it is important that one member from Donegal County Council is permitted to sit on the new LYIT University Group.

He asked that €50,000 be put into the budget for the maintenance of Greenways as they were a valuable element of the tourism economy in Donegal.

Cllr I Mc Garvey alluded to the following:-

- Need for a dedicated environmental officer to deal with planning issues.
- Islands must be adequately provided for.
- Enhanced connections needed between Donegal County Council and Dáil Eireann.
- Needs of the mica families must be given due consideration.
- Facilities for the elderly and the disabled need to be enhanced in towns like Letterkenny.
- Additional monies needed for roads and road maintenance.
- Fishing & Agricultural industries are being neglected.

Cllr Mc Brearty asked that a response be provided in relation to a number of queries that he had raised earlier in the meeting.

A further heated exchange took place during which it was suggested that one member in particular was taking over the meeting.

The Cathaoirleach addressing members said that all questions had been addressed today and in the course of the many discussions that had taken place over the last number of months. There had been, he said, clear consideration in relation to the budgetary provisions. Alluding to the request from Cllr Mc Brearty for a recorded vote, the Cathaoirleach proceeded to propose, seconded by Cllr Brogan that the 2022 Draft Budget be adopted.

Putting the proposal to the floor, he called on members to respect the chair and allow the vote to proceed.

The Chief Executive responding to a query from Cllr Mc Bride in relation to his request for additional funding for the maintenance of Greenways, advised that it would be possible to look at this request within the existing provision.

A recorded vote was then taken by the Meetings Administrator resulting in 33 voting for with 2 voting against.

Those voting in favour included:-

Cllrs Blaney, Bradley, Brogan, Canning, Conaghan, Coyle, Crawford, N Crossan, T Crossan, A Doherty, G Doherty, L Doherty, Donaghey, Farren, Gallagher, Harley, Jordan, Kavanagh, Kelly, Kennedy, Mc Bride, Mc Clafferty, Mc Dermott, I Mc Garvey, N Mc Garvey, Mc Gowan, Mc Monagle, Molloy, Murray, Naughton, O' Donnell, O' Fearraigh, and Sweeny. (33)

Those voting against were:-

Cllrs Mac Giolla Easbuig, & Mc Brearty. (2)

On the proposal of Cllr Harley, seconded by Cllr O' Donnell 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 60.29 for 2022 and that an appropriate Base Year Adjustment be applied to effect this."

On the proposal of Cllr Murray, seconded by Cllr Brogan it was resolved that Donegal County Council adopt for the financial year ended 31st December 2022, 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.”

The Cathaoirleach thanked all who had contributed to the process. He said that there would be many challenges in the year ahead but that there was an onus on the Council now to deliver for the electorate in Donegal.

The Chief Executive thanked the Cathaoirleach and the Elected Members for their engagement in what had been a long process and one in which a number of significant projects were scheduled to be delivered in the coming year.

He said that he would arrange to get a transcript of the translation requested by Cllr Crossan in due course. There were, he advised, plenty of avenues open to investigate allegations of corruption in the public service. All information provided would, he confirmed, be looked at in an open and transparent manner.

This concluded the business of the meeting.