

Minutes of Statutory Budget Meeting of Offaly County Council
Held on 18 November 2024 at 2.00 pm, in Áras an Chontae, Charleville Road,
Tullamore and via Zoom

The Meetings Administrator carried out a roll call to confirm attendance

Present

Clr. Tony McCormack, Cathaoirleach

Bryant, Ollie	Maher, Sean
Clendennen, John	Masterson, Aoife
Cribbin, Noel	McDonnell, Fergus
Egan, Hugh	Moran, Frank
Feighery, Neil	Murray, Claire (SF)
Fitzpatrick, Eddie	Murray-Smale, Claire (FF)
Harvey, Declan	O'Brien, Sean
Hennessy-Kennedy, Audrey	Ormond, Peter
Leahy, John	Quinn, Liam

Apologies

None

Officials in Attendance

Ms. A. Delaney, Chief Executive; Ms. F. Millane, D.O.F.; Ms. A. Dillon, D.O.S.; Mr. T. Shanahan, D.O.S.; Mr. N. Gorman, D.O.S.; Mr. A. Murray, A/D.O.S.; Mr. T. Mawe, F.M.A; Ms. L. Giles, A/S.E.O. Meetings Administrator; Mr. G. Bruton, A.O; Ms. L. Carbery, C.O.

1. Draft Budget 2025

The Chief Executive brought the members attention to the Draft Budget 2025, and she advised that the Executive had taken into account the members comments and concerns when drafting the Budget. She highlighted that the total Budget for 2025 was €97 million, which was an increase on previous years. She advised that the Executive were committed to the continued delivery of services across all business areas.

She noted that the members had agreed at recent Municipal District meetings to increase the GMA allocations. Further proposed increases are proposed in Housing Maintenance, DPG allocations, the Taking-in-Charges of Housing Estates, Greenways maintenance and County Roads. Also increased allocations for Tourism events, Biodiversity, Cemetery maintenance, IT Digitisation Programme, and the library book fund.

She advised that the Department had agreed to provide an additional allocation to offset the rates loss arising from the closure of West Offaly Power station, in Shannonbridge, however this allocation was only guaranteed until 2026 and provision for this short fall will be required for the future.

She advised the members that there is no proposed increase in the Rateable valuation in 2025 and that the issue of rateable valuations for Wind Farms should be resolved in 2025. It is proposed to clear the revenue deficit of €400k in 2025.

Ms. F. Millane thanked the Cathaoirleach and the elected members for their ongoing co-operation and support. She welcomed the 2025's draft budget as a positive one with an expected expenditure level of over €97million and the Capital Programme expected expenditure of over €50m in 2025 – and over €150m in the lifetime of the programme. She also thanked the Management Team and senior staff, in particular Thomas Mawe for all their input in the budget 2025.

She outlined the process of preparing the budget in accordance with S102 of the Local Government Act 2001, as amended. She provided the members with details of changes in areas of housing, greenways and roads, PLEEP for street lighting, taking in charge, land fill leachate management, tourism, biodiversity, digitisation and a number of small variations. She stressed that there have been no reductions to any budget line and therefore no reductions to services.

She advised the members that Táilte Eireann (rates valuation office) rated properties over the past month and this additionality in rates has made it possible to draft a positive budget directing financial resources to key priority areas. Grants have increased by approximately €6.5m and include housing, roads and community grants. She noted that the FEMPI increase for 2025 covers the full increase in budgeted pay costs for the year. She advised that Housing is showing substantially higher grants than 2024 due to a change in how OCC is accounting for grants and now showing the full value, not just the council contribution. Development Management is showing a reduction in grants as the Leader programme has moved away from the local authority to the Offaly Local Development Company.

She advised the members that Offaly County has almost 2,300 properties generating a total rates income in the region of € 19million. Of this total 83.5% pay less than €5,000 per annum, and 57% pay less than €2,000 per annum. The top 8% of properties produce 77% of rates income.

She brought the members attention to the directorate reports that provide substantial information on services delivered in 2024 and plans for 2025.

She highlighted that the Annual Rate on Valuation (ARV) 2025 proposed to retain the ARV of .2198. Budgeted expenditure for 2025 is €97,021,595, including the provision for the debit balance (2024 was €85m), spread across the 8 divisions. The income from Goods & Services and Grants amounts to €65,422,594 and LPT Income is €12,000,357, for co-funding major infrastructural projects.

She noted the increase in Other Income is primarily the NWCPO recoupment which has increased by €500k, over 560k in respect of the Offaly Sports partnership recoupment and a provision for additional rates that are likely to arise for 2025. The other significant change is the reduction to Irish Water income as the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage now funds the CMC element of Water Services income as reflected under Water Services Grant income.

She outlined the Grants & Subsidies estimated at €44,550,811 and provided the members details on the increases, noting this is the first year for the Croí Conaithe grant of €1m in the budget.

She highlighted that budgeted expenditure has increased between 2021 and 2025 by over €24m which is a 33% increase. €12.8m of this is in Housing, reflecting the significant changes and additional functions that have been taken on in this directorate over the past few years.

She provided the members with a detailed breakdown at sub service level within each Division. Increase in housing include areas of pre-lets, planned maintenance, DPGs and homelessness. In total the Housing budget has increased by €1.6m from own resources. Most of the changes to Roads budgets relate to grant aided works and the roads' grants for 2025 are usually advised in quarter 1 of the year. Increases from our own resources include winter and general maintenance and PLEEP.

She advised that Water Services are operated under a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Irish Water and the direct costs are fully recoupable. The cost of Group Water Schemes is not included in the SLA but the direct costs are recoupable. In the area of Development Management an additional €25k has been provided towards events and festivals supports and 30k to key biodiversity projects. In relation to unfinished housing estates there are now 2 staff in Taking in Charge. Newer estates should be cost neutral but there are some legacy issues and €310k is provided towards addressing these estates.

Environmental increases include additional leachate management, street cleaning supports of €66k and the cemeteries reserve increase of €30k. Recreation and Amenity increases include staffing and library maintenance. This is an area that will need further increases in the coming years as Edenderry Library comes on stream and is fully staffed. Other increases include €35k for library books and €100k for Greenway maintenance. She advised there are no notable changes to Agriculture, Education Health & Welfare, however there are discussions nationally about Local Authorities and XL bulldogs.

She noted that in Miscellaneous Services the General Municipal Allocation has a proposed increase of 4%. The NPPR income at €20k will no longer be in place by the end of March, however there are a small number of payment plans still in operation.

Ms. F. Millane advised that in regard to Central Management an Irish officer been appointed and HR have been provided with an additional €8,500 towards staff training. IT have increased cyber security, licencing and digitisation costs. Pensions continue to rise and are funded through the annual budget.

She noted that following the public consultation and discussions with CPG, 100% abatement for vacant premises where the rates value is under €20,000 and the property is available for sale/rent or is undergoing significant renovation, was recommended. Where the rates value is over €20,000 a rates abatement of 50% to apply.

She advised the members that the Capital Programme 2025-2027 is showing an expected spend of over €50m per annum over the next three years. This includes projects that are expected to commence, but not be completed in the three years. Progress on projects will be brought to Council on a regular basis.

In conclusion she acknowledged that this is a very positive budget. The members concerns over the past year have been considered and additional financial resources have been directed toward areas such as Housing, Roads, Taking in Charge and Cemeteries. She welcomed the proposed clearance of the historic cumulative deficit by the end of 2025. She noted the need to be mindful of the fact that the exchequer subvention for the loss of Shannonbridge rates is not committed beyond 2026 and this will need to be managed carefully over the next few years.

She advised that should the members wish to amend the budget, there must be a proposer and seconder, and the member must identify where the corresponding reductions to expenditure will be made from discretionary costs.

On proposing the budget 2025, Cllr. P. Ormond welcomed the wide range of projects and extra funding to a range of services. He agreed a long term solution will be required to offset the loss of West Offaly Power. He welcomed the additional General Municipal District allocation as important discretionary funding and the increased funding for Housing. He stressed the importance to continue to seek more funding from the Department for DPG social housing. He noted the importance funding for taking in charge, maintenance of roads and greenways. He welcomed the increase in cemetery funding and thanked the volunteers that assist to maintain the cemeteries. He noted the support for Small and Medium Enterprises and welcomed no increase in commercial rates.

Cllr. F. Moran seconded the budget 2025 and sought €5k increase to each of the Clara and Birr Community pools for operational costs. He suggested a reduction to the increase proposed for greenway maintenance as Waterways Ireland may supplement some of those maintenance costs.

The members welcomed the balanced budget, the retention of all services and the proposed increases in the areas outlined and they sought clarification on some areas.

In response to members queries, Ms. F. Millane advised that some wind turbines rates are included in budget book, with more to be rated and these rates may form part of budget 2026/2027. Finance will continue to seek additional funding from government to offset West Offaly Power. Some of the changes in budget are related to allocation of staff and will not change the provision of services. She noted that housing schemes are planned for the Edenderry area. Efficiencies in the provision of services include digitisation which will improve all services. She advised that it is not possible to freeze rates at the current rate for the full council term.

On the proposal of Cllr. P. Ormond, seconded by Cllr. D. Harvey, the members resolved to suspend Standing Orders to proceed with the Statutory Budget meeting past 3.30pm.

Ms. F. Millane read the resolution:

Adoption of Budget 2025

Resolved on the proposal of Councillor P. Ormond, seconded by Councillor F. Moran, with 18 members voting in favour, no members voting against and 1 member absent, that pursuant to Section 103(7) of the Local Government Act 2001, Offaly County Council do hereby adopt for the financial year ending 31 December 2025 the budget set out in tables A, B, D, E and F of the draft budget, amended to provide €5k increase to each of the Clara and Birr Community pools towards operational costs offset by a 10k reduction to the increase proposed for greenway maintenance, presented to the council.

Adoption of the Annual Rate

Resolved on the proposal of Councillor D. Harvey seconded by Councillor N. Feighery and agreed by the members.

Subject to Section 6 of the Local Government Rates and Other Matters Act 2019 as amended and in accordance with the Budget adopted, the members shall determine the annual rate on valuation applicable in the calculation of the rate under Section 3 of the Local Government Rates and Other Matters Act 2019 as amended.

The annual rate on valuation set out in Tables A, B, D, E and F of €0.2198 to be the annual rate on valuation to be levied for the financial year ending 31 December 2025 for the purposes set out in those tables.

Vacancy Relief

Resolved on the proposal of Councillor J. Leahy, seconded by Councillor N. Feighery and agreed by the members.

That Offaly County Council makes a scheme for the abatement of rates due to it by liable persons, or classes of liable persons, in respect of vacant properties in accordance with Section 9 of the Local Government Rates and Other Matters Act 2019, as amended.

Such a scheme in respect of vacant property will provide for a 100% abatement of rates on vacant properties where the rates value is under €20,000, and 50% where the rates value is €20,000 or more, (with a limit of five consecutive years) as provided for in Section 9 (1) of the local government rates and other matters act 2019 as amended for the financial year ending 31 December 2025.

Capital Programme 2025-2027

Resolved on the proposal of Councillor J. Leahy, seconded by Councillor C. Murray Smale, and agreed by the members present that the Capital Programme 2025 – 2027 be noted.

MINUTES CONFIRMED:

CATHAOIRLEACH

RUNAÍ

16 December 2024

