

Minutes of In-Committee Budget Meeting of Offaly County Council
Held on 13 November 2023 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

Cllr. Eddie Fitzpatrick, Cathaoirleach

Cllr. John Carroll	Cllr. John Leahy
Cllr. Clare Claffey	Cllr. F. Moran
Cllr. John Clendennen	Cllr. Tony McCormack
Cllr. Noel Cribbin	Cllr. R. McDermott
Cllr. Eamon Dooley	Cllr. S. O'Brien
Cllr. Neil Feighery	Cllr. Peter Ormond
Cllr. Mark Hackett	Cllr. Danny Owens
Cllr. Declan Harvey	Cllr. Liam Quinn
	Cllr. Sandra Feehan Smollen

Apologies

Cllr. J. Foley

Officials in Attendance

Ms. A. Delaney, Chief Executive; Mr. T. Mawe, A/H.O.F.; Ms. S. Kennedy, D.O.S.; Ms. A. Dillon, D.O.S.; Mr. B. Lennon, A/D.O.S.; Mr. E. Fennell, S.E.O.; Mr. G. Bruton, Meetings Administrator and Ms. L. Carbery, C.O.

1. Draft Budget 2024

Ms. A. Delaney, Chief Executive, brought the members attention to the Draft Budget 2024 and she welcomed the increased funding of €3,595,926 for 2024, as a result of the national LPT baseline review. She outlined the proposed allocation for the implementation of the provisions of the Official Languages Act, 2003, including provision for signage and promotion of the Irish language. Provision is also made for national pay agreements, including the national agreement for retained firefighters.

She noted the progress on initiatives in 2023 as outlined for the members in the Directorate reports, including housing allocations and retrofitting. She welcomed the opening of Esker Arts by President Michael D. Higgins and the signing of contracts for the new Fire services Training Centre. She noted further progress with Clara Fire Station having being added to the Departments programme, and approval to appoint design consultants for Part VIII. She welcomed the progress on URDF, TVR, Birr Destination Town projects and Part VIII for Edenderry Library and Arts Centre. She welcomed the progress on plans for the convent in Ferbane and Birr, Edenderry, Portarlington and Tullamore Local

Area Plans. She also welcomed the establishment of the Climate Action team, the Biodiversity Officer and policies and procedures regarding derelict sites.

She advised the members that the Local Enterprise Office commissioned a 5 Year Economic Strategy and Action Plan for Offaly, which has been completed, with actions now being implemented. This will form part of the new Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP). She welcomed two significant reports completed in 2023 the “Data Centre Integration with Renewables Report” and the “Rhode Renewable Hydrogen Report” . She noted the Grand Canal Dock, Tullamore Masterplan is nearing completion and the new Offaly Tourism and Marketing Strategy is being finalised and due to be completed by year end, 2023. She noted the Community Response Forum continues to provide a very effective network for supporting and coordinating the response to the war in Ukraine and has met regularly throughout the year. She looked forward to continuing to provide a wide range of services.

Mr. T. Mawe, A/H.O.F., provided the members with an overview of the Draft Budget 2024. He explained the white pages provided are statutory analysis of data, which include the central management charges and the green pages outline spend per service excluding central management charges. He highlighted the challenges facing balancing the budget including international factors, energy costs, wars and due to these uncertainties, he expressed the need to be cautious. He noted further issues with interest rates and loss of rates from the closure of West Offaly Power, however the main focus is to maintain spending at 2023 levels and allow targeted expenditure.

He welcomed the members decision to maintain the 15% for Local Property tax for 2023 and 2024 which will provide additional income of €722,376 to use for match funding for projects of scale across the county. He advised that the baseline review of LPT has seen Offaly share rise from 2.16% to 2.62% nationally and this 5 year review process brings certainty from a budget context, allows inflation proofing and expansion of some services in the budget for 2024.

He advised the members there is no proposal to vary the General Annual rate on valuation which remains at 0.2198 and there is provision for €412,000 to fund additional interest rate costs on Offaly County Council non mortgage borrowings. The income for the rent review has been re-invested in housing services for 2024 and €150,000 from Offaly County Council own resources has been allocated for roads to make up the shortfall from NPPR. A further €150,000 has been provided for County Roads from the Revenue Account in 2024 and the Roads Winter Maintenance Budget for 2023 has received an additional €90,00. Income and expenditure levels of national programmes like Roads Funding, Leader, SICAP, etc. have been reviewed and reflect levels of funding being received and no increase for customers is proposed for any Offaly County Council charges.

He advised the members that the implementation of the Labour Court recommendation on retained fire fighters pay presents a considerable funding challenge in 2024 and the funding of this is assumed in the budget to be provided by the Department, however, the full details of the implementation of agreement have yet to be clarified and there may be some residual cost of Offaly County, but this is not known at this point. In addition the department continue to fund pay restoration, with a small allowance for any further increases provided for in the budget.

He noted that an allocation of €300,000 has been made for Climate actions in Offaly County Council buildings and €400,000 to reduce the deficit. Some smaller allocations have been made for the Arts , Civil Defence, Biodiversity and IT costs and additional posts have been budgeted for in 2024, which in some cases are funded by external bodies. These include posts in Climate action, Tenancy Management, Homeless Prevention, Planning, Economic Development, Housing admin and Tourism.

Mr. T. Mawe read out the detail on principal amount added for 2024:

Additional Housing Provision for Voids/Prelets	637,000
Additional Housing Stock Maintenance Expenditure	264,000
Funding for Own stock Housing DPG's	100,000
Additional County Roads / Winter Maintenance Allocation	240,000
Additional resource for Public Lighting	100,000
Parking meter modernisation/ contract revision	144,000
Additional Costs increased borrowing costs in 2024	413,000
Increase in Deficit reduction provision	350,000
Additional Funding for Climate Action	300,000
Library Buildings and Utilities	104,000
Library book fund (including Edenderry library)	80,000
Economic development initiatives	82,000
UVR match funding	100,000
Forward Planning - Statutory plans and digitisation	110,000
Municipal District Allocations	66,000
Burial ground capital provision	20,000
Greenways and Trail maintenance	55,000
Street Cleaning	120,000
Parks and open spaces	90,000
Graveyard maintenance	30,000
Playgrounds Repair and renewals	90,000
Area Office signage allocation	30,000
	3,525,000

An allocation for swimming pools was also referenced.

He advised the members that Uisce Éireann have assumed full responsibility for the operation of water and waste waters services, with transitional arrangements for staff transfers and Central Management Charge (CMC) funding agreed. The draft budget anticipates this arrangement will have a small impact on the revenue account of Offaly in 2024.

He noted that significant provisions in the Local Government rates and Other Matters Act 2019, have commenced which will see significant changes in the rates billing and collection process for 2024. This requires further clarification, however implications for rates include bills will be due in full on issue of demand, Property Entry Levy (PEL) will no longer apply, Interest will be applicable to uncollected rates debts from 1st January 2025, giving some rate payers chance to catch up if in arrears. New measures regarding the vacancy abatement schemes will be in place and additional measures around the obligation of a liable person to notify the local authority about changes in status of the property. Most changes will streamline the process and should make it an easier process for both rate payers and the Local Authority. He advised that regarding the rates rebate on vacant premises, the recommendation from the executive is to retain current 100% vacancy abatement.

He informed the members that housing rents, annuities and loans collection rates have held up well throughout 2023, rates collection dipped during the Covid 19 pandemic and the difficult economic climate outlined earlier present a challenge for all businesses. A government support scheme proposed by central government may help to alleviate some of the cost pressures on business. Also a new national initiative, MYcoco.ie is an IT platform whereby rates payers and tenants can access directly details of their accounts and balances due, as well as make payments online. This is currently being rolled out in Offaly and should contribute to better interaction with the public through improved

communication. He noted the Finance Department primary role is to assist in achieving the strategic priority of developing and delivery of quality services with particular regard to Financial Management and Value for Money. Finance will continue to maintain core financial services and the solvency of the council's finances in the face of a continued economic uncertainty. He thanked all of the staff in Finance, Motor Tax, IT and Procurement sections for their diligence and commitment, adaptability and team work right throughout 2023.

The members thanked the management team for their comprehensive update. They raised queries in areas including the development of trails, interest rate costs, lighting, climate action and rates from windfarms. They sought clarity on the various allocations including the deficit, playgrounds and burial grounds.

They members welcomed the allocation for winter maintenance and swimming pools. Cllr. E. Dooley raised concerns with the possibility of disjointed trail network as Bord na Mona retain land for energy projects. Cllr. F. Moran queried if the allocation for the deficit provision is too high and if some of this could be re-allocated to other areas. The members expressed their concerns with the decline in the public lighting service, the roads allocation, litter and street cleaning. They highlighted the need for bus shelters, review of the development contribution scheme and flooding defences.

In response to members queries Mr. T. Mawe advised that the allocation for greenway trails refers to existing greenways and he agreed that following the extension of trails more funds will be required in future budgets. He outlined the costs in relation to interest rates, coming in at approximately €500,000 in 2023 and the bulk of the cost of interest rates relate to the long-term loan for the Áras. He expressed his hope that the interest rates increase may have reached their peak. In relation to burial grounds, the increased allocation is for operations capital works for extensions. The allocation for Climate Action is to focus on energy savings in council premises and this should provide leverage to access SEAI funding/grants. He sought support for the allocation to the deficit citing that great strides have been made to reduce deficit in the past 5 years.

He informed the members that the allocation for playgrounds allows for €30k for each Municipal District to improve safety and maintain equipment. He acknowledged the contribution by local communities in the upkeep of playgrounds. He highlighted the increased allocation for the General Municipal District allowance that would enable further investment in the areas of concern for the members. He welcomed the increase of €3.6m from the LPT, that will help deal with inflation and ensure the maintenance of services. This funding will be in place each year over the five year period as provided for in the LPT baseline review. He confirmed that there is consistent interaction with the rates valuation office, however there is a backlog at the office and he confirmed that rates for all 4 windfarms are being collected.

He advised the members, that the Labour court agreement for firefighters is not finalised. The Cloncreen wind farm rates will come onstream in 2024, the arts programme includes a range of actions and the €85k for tourism is towards the development of initiatives and special events.

Mr. B. Lennon confirmed the costs for lighting are due to increased energy and maintenance costs. He noted the public lighting is currently under contract and the service has improved since difficulties earlier in the year. The allocation for winter maintenance is also to cover increased costs, equipment and the costs involved are estimated.

Ms. S. Kennedy welcomed the increased funding for housing grants, that may provide leverage for more funding from the Department. She highlighted the new strategy for playgrounds and that

additional community grants may become available for more investment in this area. Costs in relation to the Ukrainian response do not come from Offaly County Council budget and homelessness support is nearly fully recoupable from the Department. She noted that the private grants are maxed out.

Ms. A. Dillon informed the members that the trail routes will be announced in coming weeks and are to be delivered within next 2 years. She noted that Fáilte Ireland are keen to further develop the trail network and a bespoke outdoor recreation scheme. The routes may not all be funded through Just Transition and maintenance funding will be required with the continued delivery of new routes.

Ms. A. Delaney, Chief Executive, brought the members attention to the Capital Budget 2024 – 2028, as circulated with the draft budget, and she invited them to submit any questions they may have before the Statutory Budget meeting on Monday 20 November at 2pm.

2. Draft Capital 2024 - 2028

Mr. T. Mawe summarised the details of the Draft Capital Budget 2024 – 2028, advising the members that over the next five year period the current balance of €12.094m plus projected income of €5.0m (€1.0m x5) will provide total available for disbursement of €17.094m against a projected requirement of €20.990m, giving a capital budget shortfall of €3.896m. This anticipated shortfall may restrict Offaly County Council ability to undertake some capital projects and it also means that some projects may have to be deferred or prioritised having regard to the funds available.

MINUTES CONFIRMED:

CATHAOIRLEACH

RUNAÍ

18 December 2023

