

Minutes of Monthly Meeting of Offaly County Council
Held on 17th October 2022 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. Frank Moran Cathaoirleach

Cllr. John Carroll	Cllr. John Leahy
Cllr. Clare Claffey	Cllr. Tony McCormack
Cllr. John Clendennen	Cllr. Sean O'Brien
Cllr. Noel Cribbin	Cllr. R. McDermott
Cllr. Eamon Dooley	Cllr. Peter Ormond
Cllr. Eddie Fitzpatrick	Cllr. Danny Owens
Cllr. John Foley	Cllr. Liam Quinn
Cllr. Mark Hackett	Cllr. Ken Smollen
Cllr. Declan Harvey	

Apologies

Cllr. Neil Feighery

Officials in Attendance

Ms. A. Delaney, Chief Executive; Mr. T. Shanahan, D.O.S.; Ms. S. Kennedy, D.O.S.; Mr. S. Duclot, D.O.S.; Mr. M. Connolly, H.O.F.; Ms. M. Cleary, S.E.O.; Mr. J. Cunningham, S.E.; Mr. G. Bruton, Meetings Administrator; Mr. C. Kelly, S.O. and Ms. L. Carbery, C.O.

Votes of Sympathy

Votes of Sympathy were unanimously extended to the following:

Anne Coughlan and the Coughlan family, St. Andrews, Church Road, Tullamore on the death of her husband Tom Coughlan;

The Hoey Family, Store Street Tullamore, on the death of their sister Breda Hoey;

The Glennon Family, Rahan Road, Tullamore on the death of their mother Mary Glennon;

The Hughes Family, 59 The Green, Clara, on the death of their mother, Eileen Hughes.

The Chief Executive, on her own behalf and on behalf of the staff of Offaly County Council, joined with the members in these votes of sympathy.

Cllr. S. O'Brien joined with the members in extending their best wishes for a speedy recovery to former Councillor John Flanagan on his convalescence.

1. Confirmation of Minutes

On the proposal of Cllr. D. Harvey, seconded by Cllr. L. Quinn, the members resolved to adopt the minutes of the Ordinary meeting of Offaly County Council held on Monday 19th September 2022.

2. Minutes for Noting

The members noted the following minutes:

- Minutes of the Climate Action, Environment, Water & Transportation Strategic Policy Committee meeting held on 16th February 2022
- Minutes of the Community, Cultural and Emergency Services Strategic Policy Committee meeting held on 25th February 2022
- Minutes of the Corporate Policy Group meeting held on 18th July 2022

3. Section 183 of the Local Government Act 2001

On the proposal of Cllr. E. Dooley, seconded by Cllr. J. Leahy the members resolved to Lease the Heritage Centre, Ferbane to An Síolán for a term of 20 years at a fee of €10.00 per annum.

4. Section 183 of the Local Government Act 2001

Offaly County Council proposes to sell 0.0236 acres of land at Tubrid, Shinrone, in the townland of Clareen and Tubrid to Liam Hynes and Michelle Houlden for the sum of €500.00

Cllr. F. Moran advised this item was deferred until next meeting.

5. Annual Financial Statement 2021

Mr. M. Connolly, H.O.F. advised the members that there have been no changes from the draft as presented to the members previously. The members noted the Annual Financial Statement 2021.

Cllr. L. Quinn expressed concerns about the rising cost of living and the impact this will have on the budget 2023.

Cllr. J. Carroll sought clarity on the on-going rates valuation appeals and the resulting impact on the budget.

Mr. M. Connolly acknowledged that it is a very challenging environment ahead. He noted the Department have verbally confirmed that the funding allocation provided since 2020 will continue to be provided for 2023 and Offaly County Council are seeking a long-term solution to the loss of rates due to the De-carbonisation agenda. In response to the query on rates appeals, he confirmed that a significant number of appeals have not been finalised and any appeals granted, will result in the rate bill retrospectively adjusted for the ratepayer.

The members expressed their concerns with the rates appeals process and the need for resolution.

6. Statutory Audit Report 2021

The members noted the Statutory Audit Report 2021.

7. Housing Presentation

Ms. M. Cleary provided the members with a presentation on Housing Services. She updated the members on the social housing list, HAP, Homelessness, Home Loans, Grants, the Retrofit programme and maintenance request numbers. She advised that the national social housing needs assessments are ongoing with reminders issued for completion of forms. She pointed out that the revised Differential Rent Scheme is in effect since 3rd September 2022. She advised the members that the number of private rented inspections has increased. She brought the members attention to the challenges in delivery of housing services with increased prices, delay in receiving goods and limited availability of contractors.

Ms. M. Cleary updated the members on the Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee undergoing a midterm review of Offaly's Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024. She noted that a Traveller Tenancy Sustainment Officer has been appointed and the Offaly Traveller Interagency Group continue to meet. She outlined the on-going engagement with the Estate Management Interagency Group and the Housing and Disability Steering Group. She informed the members on domestic violence support, in collaboration with Offaly Domestic Violence Support Services, Tusla and Oaklee Housing Association and she welcomed the progression on the acquisition of safe homes for each municipal district

Ms. M. Cleary advised the members on the Housing for All Delivery Action Plan 2022 – 2026, with projected 127% exceedance of the targets set out. She outlined the plan for Turnkey, Part V, council construction and Approved Housing Bodies projects.

The members thanked Ms. M. Cleary for her comprehensive presentation and they acknowledged the work of staff and the challenges they face on daily basis. They welcomed the allocation of housing and the increase in Offaly County Council housing stock. They agreed that building more social housing is of utmost importance. They raised concerns over the private rental market and the exit of many private landlords, resulting in very few rental properties available for HAP tenants. They expressed concerns about the speed of the grants scheme programmes and the increasing amount of grant applications. They acknowledged the rising cost of materials and lack of contractors is an issue. They raised concerns about the affordability of housing for middle-income people and expressed their disappointment that the income threshold for Offaly had not been increased in the government's last review. The members also raised concerns about the affordability of retrofitting for private householders and the running costs of heat pumps for social tenants. They sought more details on the maintenance requests and numbers of refugees accommodated in Offaly.

Cllr. S. O'Brien raised queries on the new development at Kearneys Field, in particular traffic congestion for the access road and the wall blocking light for the Arden View residents. He also sought an update on the progress of group schemes for Traveller Accommodation.

Cllr. C. Claffey sought more details on the number of children homeless in Offaly and on the timeline for the provision of the safe houses in the three municipal districts.

Cllr. K. Smollen expressed concern for tenants in private rented accommodation, issued with notices to quit and he called for more engagement with them.

Cllr. D. Harvey sought clarity on the provision of heat pumps in new social housing and he highlighted the need for more bungalows and land banks for Offaly County Council.

Cllr. P. Ormond queried if there is any scope to do minor works under the retrofit programme.

Cllr. J. Carroll expressed concerns on engagement with the Approved Housing Bodies and he queried if the Housing need report is still in operation. He welcomed the progress on Traveller Accommodation.

Cllr. E. Fitzpatrick queried if there is any possibility of setting up an emergency fund for housing adaptation grants and he called for extensive vetting of social tenants when houses are being allocated.

Cllr. J. Leahy queried the low level of housing loans.

Cllr. J. Clendennen sought clarity on the possible provision of micro generation solar heat panels.

Ms. S. Kennedy, D.O.S., thanked the members for the comments and queries. She noted that targets have and will continue to be exceeded, and for the first time Offaly County Council housing stock has increased to over 2,000 units. She noted the grants scheme have made up a lot of ground with works progressing and she urged applicants to get the works completed and invoices submitted as soon as possible. She welcomed the approval of stage 1 for the traveller group scheme in Birr and two further schemes planned for Tullamore. She advised that delays in delivery of new units are being reduced and this will help with the numbers on the social housing list. She informed the members that Offaly County Council try to purchase homes where tenants have been given notice to quit in a bid to prevent homelessness, and where possible homeless clients are housed within the county. She advised that a lot of consultation took place with any tenants that availed of the retrofit scheme and the new stock are subject to the highest building control standards. She noted that intensive work with the JPC subcommittee and a strong anti-social behaviour policy are in place to work on anti-social behaviour. She advised the vetting process for allocations is set-down by regulations and includes engagement with the Garda. She agreed anti-social behaviour is unfortunate, however there is an anti-social behaviour team and a tenant liaison officer in place to deal with issues. She agreed bungalows and land banks are necessary, but difficult to acquire.

Ms. S. Kennedy informed the members that there is positive engagement with the Approved Housing Bodies and they are an important part of delivery of the housing programme. She advised that the responsibility for the Ukrainian refugees and immigration remains with the International Protection Accommodation Services office. Offaly have accommodated fewer refugees than other counties and Ukrainian refugees do not have access to social housing. She noted that the Department are encouraging mixed unit bed accommodation and they have approved the appointment of a Vacant Homes Officer. She confirmed that further engagement on widening the income thresholds is ongoing with the Department

In response to members, queries Mr. J. Cunningham advised that the housing development at Kearneys field was subject to extensive public consultation and the access road may be reviewed when the project is complete. With regard to the retrofit programme he informed the members that 80

units have been completed to date, there have been no issues with the tenants, and the cost of other fuel sources has increased in line with electricity costs. He noted that the national policy is to install heat pumps in new houses, the Department have not approved a solar panel scheme and SEAI cover grants for private house owners to assist their retrofit. He advised that some maintenance requests are not within the remit of Offaly County Council and there is some duplication in the figures.

Ms. M. Cleary advised the members that changes in the HAP discretionary payment have been implemented in recent months with an increase from 20% to 35%. She highlighted that Offaly County Council provide 10% funding for DPGs and 20% for private grants and with the cost of works increasing this has impacted on grants. She updated the members that in conjunction with Oaklee, Tusla, and Offaly Domestic Violence Support Services, sale agreed status has been progressed on two safe house units. She advised that the last quarter regional report for homelessness had not yet been received.

8. Just Transition

Mr. S. Duclot, D.O.S., informed the members that the Midland Regional Transition Team met at the end of September and the Just Transition Commissioner has agreed to remain in this role to the end of the year. He advised the members that the framework legislation will be finalised by the end of year and the Exchange EU Programme for the midlands region provides Ireland and midlands connection with other countries and access to further funding streams. He advised that the EU Just Transition fund Commissioner is working with Department to assess the requirements for the National Just Transition funding and the Territorial Programme will be adopted formally by the end of year. He informed the members that as per their request at the September Meeting he has written to the Department seeking an update on the projects approved for Strands 1 and 2 of the Just Transition funding and is currently waiting for a response.

The members thanked him for his update and queried if Offaly County Council staff are included in the Exchange EU Programme.

Cllr. C. Claffey raised concerns that the retrofit grants currently available are not sufficient. On the proposal of Cllr. C. Claffey, seconded by Cllr. J. Leahy the members agreed to write to minister to consider other options to increase uptake for retrofitting grants.

In response to the members, Mr. S. Duclot informed the members that as part of the Exchange EU programme, delegates from Western Macedonia in Greece visited Offaly. They shared best practices about implementing the Just Transition in their respective regions. He agreed to write to the Minister with regard to the Retrofitting grants.

9. Monthly Management Report

Ms. A. Delaney, Chief Executive, brought the members attention to the Monthly Management Report as circulated with the agenda. She noted the Birr Local Area Plan is on public display until 28th October and the Grand Canal Greenway Henseys Bridge to Pullough section is scheduled for completion in November. She highlighted the launch of Tullamore 400 with an event in Millennium Square, Main Street, Tullamore on Friday 30th September, which included an outdoor exhibition.

She acknowledged the on-going work of housing services and she welcomed the new scheme Croí Cónaithe launched in July to provide grants for the refurbishment of vacant properties for occupation as a principal private residence. She noted the Local Economic Community Plan is due for completion

in 2023 and the Comhairle Na nÓg members provided a presentation to a Greek Delegation as part of an Exchange EU programme in the Council Chamber. She advised the members of the Learning Gate project with TUS launching on 26th October in The Junction, working towards the provision of Higher Education programmes in Offaly.

The members thanked Ms. A. Delaney for her comprehensive report.

10. Corporate Policy Group Report

Cllr. F. Moran, Cathaoirleach, advised the members of the launch of the “More Women and Diversity in Politics” Offaly programme by Minister Peter Burke on 18th October and of the upcoming visit by Minister Darragh O’Brien to Offaly on the 10th November. He also advised the members that the December meeting has been rescheduled to the 12th December 2022.

11. Comhdhálacha / Conferences

Training below was approved at Corporate Policy Group meeting on 14th October 2022:

The LAMA Autumn/Winter Seminar is taking place the 9th-10th November at the Four Seasons Hotel Coolshannagh, Monaghan, H18 Y220.

The members noted the Conference and Training Reports as listed:

- AILG Annual Training March 2022
- LAMA Spring Training April 2022
- AILG Module 2nd May 2022
- Letterkenny Tidy Towns Dereliction Conference July 2022
- AILG Module 3rd July 2022
- AILG Autumn Training September 2022

12. Comhfhreagras/ Correspondence

On the proposal of Cllr. T. McCormack, seconded by Cllr. S. O’Brien, the members resolved to write to Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in support of the resolution by Tipperary County Council for additional funding for Local Authorities to maintain essential services.

Mr. M. Connolly thanked the members for their support and he noted that the Department have committed €60m to the sector; however, this amount will not cover the spiralling costs faced nationally.

On the proposal of Cllr. S. O’Brien, seconded by Cllr. F. Moran, the members resolved to write to the Minister for Housing, in support of the resolution by Mayo County Council to enable derelict properties in rural areas to be eligible to avail of the Croí Cónaithe scheme.

Mr. S Duclot advised the members that in early October, the Croí Cónaithe scheme was extended to all cities and rural areas.

13. Any Other Business

On the proposal of Cllr. C. Claffey, seconded by Cllr. D. Harvey, the members agreed to host a Civic Welcome for Offaly Domestic Violence Support Services and Minister Helen McEntee to commemorate 25 year anniversary of the service on 2nd November 2022.

On the proposal of Cllr. S. O'Brien, seconded by Cllr. K. Smollen, the members resolved to write to the Minister for Health for increased GP services and nursing staff and to provide support for young doctors working long hours and facing huge costs in setting up rural GP practices.

Cllr. F. Moran advised the members that due to a conflict of interest, he excused himself from the next item of business, and Cllr. T. McCormack, Leas Cathaoirleach, chaired the meeting for the item in question.

On the proposal of Cllr. S. O'Brien, seconded by Cllr. D. Harvey, the members resolved to write to the National Ambulance Service and the Department of Health to highlight the difficulties faced by emergency medical technicians including low salary and poor working conditions resulting in a number of technicians leaving the service. They further highlighted the issue of ambulances providing countrywide cover, often leaving none available for County Offaly and surrounding areas.

MINUTES CONFIRMED:

CATHAOIRLEACH

RUNAÍ

21st November 2022

