

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE NA GAILLIMHE

Minutes of Housing, Culture and Recreation SPC Meeting held in the Council Chamber on Tuesday, 2nd February, 2016 at 11.00a.m.

I Láthair:-

Baill: Cllr. T. McHugh, Chairperson
Cllr. D. Burke
Cllr. D. Killilea
Cllr. M. Fahy
Cllr. P. Hynes
Cllr. E. Mannion
Ms. Helena McElmeel
Mr. Declan McKeon

Oifigigh: Mr. P. Gavican, D.O.S
Mr. M. Owens, S.E.O. Corporate Services
Ms. J. Brann, S.E.O. Housing
Mr. M. O'Donnell, A.O. Housing
Ms. M. Jordan, A.O. Housing
Mr. M. Sheil, S.E.E. Housing
Ms. E. Dolan, A.O. Corporate Services
Mr. P. Rabbitt, County Librarian
Ms. J. Gibbons, S.O. Housing
Ms. M. Flaherty, C.O. Housing

Apologies were received from John Fitzpatrick of Horse Care Ireland.

Cllr. Mc. Hugh welcomed Ms. Maria Flaherty as the new Secretary to the Committee.

1. Minutes of Meeting held on 9th December, 2015

The minutes of the meeting held on 9th December, 2015 were adopted on the proposal of Cllr. Fahy, seconded by Cllr. Killilea.

Matters Arising

None

2. Update on Social Housing Strategy

Mr. O'Donnell gave a brief update on the Social Housing Strategy Delivery as a follow on from the previous SPC meeting. He outlined the Council's continuous efforts to meet the demand through its existing stock, construction, purchase of houses, Part V's, RAS, Long Term Leasing and through the recent addition of HAP. He said that approval has been given for 54 units under the capital programme and that a construction, a Design Team has been engaged and it is hoped to start the Part 8 process within the next month. In relation to Acquisitions, 15 contracts have been signed and funding drawn down, 37 are at contract stage/sale agreed, offers had been made on a further 9 properties, and a number are at inspection stage. Mr. O'Donnell advised that the HAP scheme has been implemented, and

that this would be dealt with in more detail under Item No. 4. He also advised that under the 3rd Pillar of the Social Housing Strategy, the new Tenant Purchase Scheme to be implemented shortly.

Cllr. Killilea made particular reference to the construction project for Tuam and outlined it was a welcome announcement. He advised that the Residents are extremely happy and had commended the Council for engaging with them in the initial stages. In relation to Social Housing, Cllr. Killilea queried if there is a process in place to assist a tenant, who on foot of anti-social behaviour leaves their council house. He explained that he was aware of such a case whereby the tenant went into private rented accommodation and their rent supplement ceased. Ms. Jordan advised that there is an Anti-Social Behaviour Unit in place to deal with anti-social behaviour problems/incidents. In relation to rent supplement, Ms. Jordan advised that she would be happy to examine the detail of this separately.

Mr. Gavican advised the meeting that there will be a shift away from acquisitions going forward and there will be more of a focus on (a) current expenditure, i.e. Leasing, HAP, AHB's and (b) construction. He said that tailoring of the strategy will be necessary and of utmost importance going forward.

Cllr. Hynes acknowledged that acquisitions will be scaled back and queried if sites are being identified to build social housing. Mr. Gavican advised that the targets set nationally in relation to capital delivery have been exceeded, however they have not been met on current expenditure. He indicated that a number of sites have been identified which are currently with the Department. Once lands are deemed suitable the Department releases them giving sanction to the Local Authority to develop them.

Cllr. Hynes queried the land banks currently in the Council's possession. Mr. Gavican advised that land banks have been looked at in terms of suitability, demand and services. A list was compiled and submitted to the Department who then release lands accordingly, an example being the recent announcement made by the Minister in relation to Gilmartin Road, Tuam.

Cllr. Hynes welcomed and commended the introduction of HAP, however he said he has been informed that applicants are being met with reluctance by Landlords refusing to participate. Cllr. T. McHugh suggested that some landlords are drawn more to the private sector for leasing as opposed to people in receipt of rent supplement/HAP. He explained that HAP is very new and through lack of knowledge, few landlords understand its workings, however it is a good scheme.

3. Housing Construction / Supply in the County

Mr. Gavican said that he is on the National Committee of the CCMA and of major concern currently is the difficulty in housing supply, especially in certain urban areas where shortage of supply is more acute, i.e. Galway, Dublin and Limerick. He explained that while the Housing Strategy is in place at National level there is no engagement with the construction sector, and this is where attention needs to be given to get development through Part V moving towards building sustainable communities and having a steady supply. He advised that he was approached by and met with Ms. McElmeel, member of our SPC, whereby a discussion took place on holding an event later this year, with a Galway City and County specific theme on housing constraints, i.e. availability,

affordability, construction, supply etc. It would incorporate various sectoral interests i.e. Banking Industry, 3rd Level Graduates, Auctioneers, Valuers, Construction Industry Federation, Developers to name a few. Ms. McElmeel stressed the importance of finding ways to speed up the delivery of housing supply. She said in holding and supporting such an event one would hear first-hand and get a better understanding of the current situation in relation to the delivery of housing/residential units from all relevant Sectors.

Cllr. McHugh agreed with the holding of such an event and said it should be progressed, encompassing all the different bodies mentioned. He stressed the importance of making private developers aware of the viability to provide units in the future, where at the moment it is not. A lot of aspects/factors need to be teased out and should be done as soon as possible as housing supply is becoming a bigger crisis, more so in the City. He said it is prudent of the Housing SPC to move this forward. Cllr. Killilea supported the event and said that all stakeholders need to be involved in every aspect from Planners to Financiers.

Mr. McKeon said it would be important to have a representative from the Department of Education at the event for the Schools (both primary, national and 3rd level), Sports and Recreation area to comment on where the population is growing and the money to be targeted. He said that the larger towns are not benefiting from sporting budgets and that sporting facilities are not being placed in the more populated areas, where needed. Mr. McKeon stressed the importance of one needs to be thinking of 10-15 years down the road. Cllr. McHugh agreed and said this link is very important however, initially the focus has to be on how to increase the supply of housing, and everything else will follow. He advised that sporting facilities are dependent on separate investment like Sports Capital Grant and department allocated funding, however acknowledged the importance of it and bringing in 3rd Level Institutions like GMTI, NUIG.

Cllr. Mannion supported the holding of the event and its concept but questioned whether the resources were available to organise it. She queried if the Housing Agency could assist. Cllr. McHugh asked the Director of Services if a small group of people can be brought together over the next couple of months to organise the event. Mr. Gavican advised that the event would be the initial step with the services to follow. He proposed that by the next SPC in April a small team will be in place to put forward a presentation with the aim of holding the event in May 2016.

The holding of an event was proposed by Cllr. Killilea, seconded by Cllr. Burke.

4. Presentation on HAP

Mr. O'Donnell gave a presentation on Housing Assistance Payments, the new form of Social Housing Support which falls under Pillar 2 of the Social Housing Strategy. Mr. O'Donnell advised the members that the provision of HAP by the Council will lead to a more integrated system of social housing support delivery. The information briefing outlined how HAP operates along with the current position of the Council in relation to its implementation and rollout. At present, for the initial stages, only newly qualified applicants for Social Housing Support will be set-up, this action was taken on the advice/direction given by the Department. Applicants currently in receipt of rent supplement will continue to be dealt with by the DSP for the time being and in due course, people who are on rent supplement for 18 months or longer will be moved across to HAP

tenancies on a planned, phased basis. This phasing will be decided by the Council based on its resources and will be done in a structured and logical fashion.

Mr. O'Donnell outlined the monthly rent caps set by the Department which determine the limit of direct HAP payment to the landlords. He advised that there is discretion for the Council to exceed the cap by a maximum of 20%, along with approaching the Department should the need arise on a case by case basis if the household profile does not equate in relation to the current bands.

Mr. O'Donnell outlined the progress to date, that the HAP Team is in place within Housing and training/briefings have been provided for all Housing staff, with Limerick City & County Council acting as the processing hub nationally. 23 plus HAP tenancies have already been setup and put in place. Galway City Council commenced with HAP on 1st February 2016 and with there being a crossover with areas of choice between the City and County, Galway County Council will be working closely with the City throughout the process. Mr. O'Donnell outlined the many advantages of this new support, the main one being it allows recipients to take up full-time employment and still keep their housing support. He explained that their rent will increase in accordance with income, however with there being a maximum rent of €84 he advised that there will be a requirement to examine the current arrangements for maximum rents under the rent scheme. Going forward, Mr. O'Donnell advised that the Council will be liaising with the DSP on the process of transferring long-term rent supplement recipients to HAP, and within a number of years the DSP will have taken a step back.

Cllr. Burke commended the presentation. He queried the long term changeover from rent supplement to HAP and if the council envisages problems with buy in from Landlords, is it more onerous in relation to the condition of houses. He also queried issues with anti-social behaviour post signing of HAP agreement, would this undermine the agreement in place between the tenant/landlord and be used as a means to render the contract void. Mr. O'Donnell said it was difficult to say if problems will occur with buy in from Landlords, however, financially it is not met with much reluctance in relation to the rent caps. He advised that each property is technically inspected and one will have to wait and see if any problems arise from the inspections. He advised that all properties have to meet standards set within the regulatory framework. In relation to anti-social behaviour, Mr. O'Donnell advised that dealing with anti-social behaviour regarding tenants was the responsibility of the landlord under the Residential Tenancies Act 2004.

Cllr. Hynes queried the position in relation to old age pensioners who are approved for social housing support, working part time, are trying to identify private rented accommodation, what will they be paying in differential rent. Mr. O'Donnell advised that the rent will be calculated based on income using the differential rent scheme. However, he said the council would be happy to advise on individual cases with specific income details to hand. Cllr. McHugh agreed with Mr. O'Donnell.

Cllr. Killilea queried the difference between RAS and HAP. He said that housing supply is a major issue and the onus is being placed on the person to source the accommodation when the housing supply is not there to meet the demand. He queried if a HAP application can become a RAS agreement with a longer commitment. Mr. O'Donnell said that there are similarities between RAS and HAP, however, the difference being that HAP will replace rent supplement long-term. He explained that rent supplement clients are in

tenancies/houses and the focus will be on transferring them from rent supplement to HAP. He agreed that the biggest challenge is supply and that HAP is only one mechanism to assist with the provision of social housing supports. Cllr. Killilea asked if the Council can convert HAP to RAS, to which Mr. O'Donnell advised that there is no provision for this and that the Department is of the view that the schemes will operate separately. Cllr. Mannion queried the inspection process and asked if it occurs pre signing. Mr. O'Donnell advised that the inspection does not take place pre signing of the tenancy and that the scheme provides for it to be carried out within the first 8 months from the date the contract commences.

Mr. Gavican advised the members that marketing around the HAP scheme needs to be done to give clarity to landlords and applicants. He cited Dublin County Council as an example as to how HAP is proving a success, whereby in Qtr4 of last year they struggled to obtain properties, however in the last 3 months HAP has brought a substantial number of new properties. He said that he believes it's the way forward to increasing supply.

5. Presentation from Horse Care Ireland

This item was deferred.

Apologies received from Mr. John Fitzpatrick of Horse Care Ireland. Due to poor weather conditions he was unable to travel.

6. Update on Galway County Library Items

Mr. Rabbitt gave a detailed presentation on the Galway County Library Service which gave a general overview of the library service, its structure, services and events, challenges and future. He also gave detail on the Galway Library Development Programme 2016-2021, its vision, objectives and actions. He explained that this 5 year plan sets out an ambitious approach for the future of the public library service in Galway City and County which proposes measures to continue to develop and to deliver a library service which meets the information, learning and cultural needs of individuals and communities and, in doing so, contributes to economic recovery and social and cultural improvement. 8 Key priority areas and actions have been identified for the plan, the main priority being to provide the community with a comprehensive Library service to recognised International and National Public Library Standards.

Cllr. McHugh thanked Mr. Rabbitt for such a detailed presentation and confirmed that the increase in funding approved this year was an acknowledgement of how valuable the Library service is to Galway as a whole. Cllr. Hynes agreed and acknowledged the excellence of the presentation being well researched with great emphasis on services, education along with various other aspects. He queried if consideration could be given to making available the 1836 Ordnance Survey maps online, as they contain a lot of historical information/text. Mr. Rabbitt confirmed that maps are physically available at Library Headquarters, for example the 1845 maps, however he said he would look into making the 1836 available.

Ms. McElmeel advised that all maps are available on OIS. Mr. Rabbitt undertook to investigate if a link to the 1836 maps would be possible from the Galway Library/Council web page. Ms. McElmeel queried the cost of printing and if there is any room for a student

rate/discount. Mr. Rabbitt said he would review student rate but advised that the library has to be careful in doing so for commercial reasons. Mr. Gavican advised that there would be no student discount as the membership fee has been removed and the Council is down €35,000 from doing so.

Cllr. Mannion commended the Library Service and its staff. She suggested incorporating a cultural space for the likes of art work, she gave the example of Clifden and holding an Arts festival, making available open space to do same.

8. Any Other Business

It was agreed to take this item before Item No. 7.

Mr. Sheil gave a brief outline on demountable dwellings and their uses. He explained that a demountable is a prefabricated house planted in a particular location used ideally as a last resort for people with very poor living conditions. Mr. Sheil advised that there are currently 52 demountable dwellings being provided for the elderly who have chosen the option of a demountable as they do not want to move from their site and funds are not available to build a new dwelling. He stressed that this is the best finance option available for such remote locations.

In relation the operation of demountable dwellings, Mr. Sheil advised that a licence agreement is put in place with the landowner and when the person is deceased, the licence ceases. He explained that the structure is not the most desirable form of housing in terms of disabled access, and that built housing is the primary way, however, the demountable dwellings are efficient in terms of resources in helping to meet the housing need. He stressed the importance of maintaining the capability to continue erecting demountables on site especially in certain cases where people have very specific needs i.e. intellectual/physical disability and have a short life expectancy.

In terms of vacant/derelict demountable dwellings, Mr. Sheil advised that these are removed and the site is decommissioned. However, in some cases the demountable is in good condition and the council would seek to upgrade. For new demountables, planning permission has to be sought under the old Planning Act, before Planning was not required. Mr. Sheil advised that there are 100 derelict demountable dwellings and that the plan over the next 5 years is to eliminate and remove.

Cllr. Mannion queried if demountable dwellings are still being used to house people and what the cost of providing them and the rent payable. Mr. Sheil advised that they are being used to house people and that the demountables are upgraded to be fit for purpose intended and in good condition. He advised that the demountable costs in the region of €25,000, dependent on number of factors, for example, site location, foundation, septic tank/well. Cllr. Mannion said she was shocked to think demountable dwellings were still being used to house people. Cllr. McHugh advised that some people chose to live in a demountable dwelling. Mr. Sheil agreed and said that people living in unfit accommodation and who do not want to leave their site have this as an option. He advised that they pay a reduced rent of €25.

Cllr. Killilea agreed and acknowledged that some people do not wish to move from the home location, however, he queried if rural build would be an option with the transfer of

land to the Council, whereby it remains tenanted by Galway County Council to rule out demountables. Mr. Sheil advised that this would prove difficult given the constraints on housing construction in rural areas, whereby only exceptional cases are considered. Capital Investment also plays a pivotal role in that in remote locations it proves difficult to rent the property again. He said it demountable dwellings boil down to the housing need and age profile, whereby it is more suitable for the elderly.

Mr. Gavican advised that demountable dwellings are not the most desirable means of housing however they do have a place and time in terms of social housing provision. He explained that it is very important to be careful and critically analyse their use, in particular for the elderly. Putting demountable dwellings into context, Mr. Gavican stressed the challenge of rural housing in terms of land holdings/family orientation, and said that demountable dwellings are for a very distinctive category of people.

Cllr. Mannion queried if housing grants are available and if there is an issue with staffing for the processing of them. Mr. Gavin advised that the grants are available with no staffing issue.

7. Presentation on Recreation and Amenity – Current Policy/Services and Future Options

Ms. Dolan gave a detailed presentation on Recreation and Amenity Development highlighting the policy context, Galway County Council as Facilitator, main aims/services, resources and future needs. Ms. Dolan referred to the objectives as set out in the County Development Plan 2015-2021. She stressed the important role Partnership has to play in Recreation and Amenity Development and how this approach makes it all possible.

Cllr. McHugh commended the very detailed and comprehensive presentation. He said that there are issues in relation to maintenance of facilities, areas and equipment. Mr. Gavican advised the Recreation and Amenity is a very important area for the local authority which is underestimated in Galway. He said that resources are the main challenge.

Mr. McKeon queried the provision of facilities and their distribution highlighting that it is not done equally, the smaller areas benefitting more so than the larger areas/towns. He said that it is not enough to have facilities in private schools, that the public need community sports halls and indoor facilities.

In reply Ms. Dolan referred to the Settlement Hierarchy Map from the Development Plan and noted the Council's policy was to ensure a standard of amenity in key settlements, however, they did not control investments such as the Sports Capital Programme.

Cllr. Mannion commended the work being done in the area of recreation and amenity and asked if it would be possible to aim for an amenity park in Clifden Town to which Ms. Dolan said she would discuss same with Cllr. Mannion.

It was agreed that the next meeting will take place on Tuesday, 5th April, 2016.

This concluded the business of the meeting.