

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE NA GAILLIMHE
Minutes of Housing SPC Meeting held on Wednesday, 1st June 2022 in the Council Chamber, Galway County Council at 10 a.m.

I Láthair:-

Baill:

Cllr. Joe Byrne, Chairperson

Cllr. Jimmy McClearn

Cllr. Thomas Welby

Cllr James Charity

Mr. Enda McGuane (Business)

Ms. Aimee McGee (Clúid)

Ms. Nora Corcoran (Social Inclusion)

Oifigh:

Mr. Liam Hanrahan, Director of Services, Housing

Ms. Carmel Kilcoyne, Senior Executive Officer, Housing

Mr. Gerard Scully, Senior Executive Officer, Housing

Ms. Nuala Heffernan, Administrative Officer, Housing

Ms. Angela Spelman, Administrative Officer, Housing

Mr. Damien Mitchell, Senior Engineer, Housing

Mr. Kieran Keon, Senior Social Worker, Housing

Ms. Genevieve Byrne, Assistant Staff Officer, Housing

Apologies:

Cllr Eileen Mannion, Ms. Tara Flynn (Construction)

1. Minutes of SPC meeting held 6th April 2022

The minutes of the meeting held on 6th April 2022 were adopted on the proposal of Cllr. Thomas Welby and seconded by Cllr. James Charity.

Update regarding temporary housing of Ukrainian refugee situation given by Mr. Liam Hanrahan

- Mr Liam Hanrahan outlined that that the emergency accommodation was activated one weekend in the community centre in Oranmore and over the Easter break in Calasanctius School in Oranmore - longer term options are now being investigated
- Mr. Hanrahan also outlined that there have been responses from various agencies including the Community Response Forum along with the ETB, Túsla, HSE, local representatives etc. - currently the Ukrainian refugees are housed in hotels. Progression has been made in relation to PPS numbers being allocated, language classes and employment service assessments – there are also courses being developed to make their qualifications relevant in Ireland. Túsla are providing extra support for children if required.
- Mr. Hanrahan stated that most of the pledged properties did not materialise as many of them were ruled out due to issues with remote locations or lack of facilities.
- Mr. Hanrahan indicated that there were a number of longer-term options being looked at with a view to long term contracts being entered in to with the B & B's and hotels (contracts with the Department of Environment) – the Local Authority acts as a liaison in this situation.
- Mr. Hanrahan clarified that the Ukrainian refugees are not eligible for housing support i.e., to go on to the Housing list, and that Galway County Council is not holding any social houses to form part of the Ukrainian response.

Discussion:

- Cllr James Charity queried the number of Ukrainian refugees in County Galway
- Mr. Liam Hanrahan outlined that there are 1,200 Ukrainians currently in hotels and other accommodation, and that the number is the 5th highest in Ireland. Mr. Hanrahan indicated that there were several offers of accommodation but that many proved unsuitable due to reasons of remote locations or lack of facilities
- Cllr Jimmy McClearn gave an example of 60 Ukrainian refugees in the Kiltormer area and queried if there was a local link bus
- Cllr Joe Byrne agreed that there was an issue with local transport due to issues of full buses and lack of transport for the locals in addition to tourists

Discussion re matters mentioned in Minutes from previous SPC meeting

- Cllr Joe Byrne queried the Retrofit programme issues that were to be followed up by Alan Brogan
- Mr. Liam Hanrahan indicated that a new handbook is being developed by Alan Brogan & Kevin Murphy's team
- Cllr Byrne also queried if the new Tenant Purchase booklet is ready
- Ms. Nuala Heffernan clarified that the Tenant Purchase booklet has not been finalised by the Department of Environment, Local Government & Heritage yet

- Cllr Byrne enquired regarding updates on the Allocations Scheme and the Housing Action Plan
- Mr. Damien Mitchell replied that a submission on the Housing Action Plan has been made to the Department at the time of the last SPC meeting but that there has been no reply as yet
- Cllr Jimmy McClearn gave an example of problems with PCP boards in houses that have been retrofitted, and that this has caused issues for the tenants

2. Housing statistics update – presentation by Gerard Scully, Senior Executive Officer

(Power Point presentation has been circulated by email to the SPC and full Council)

Discussion:

- Cllr Joe Byrne queried the reason that the Housing Department were carrying out Garda checks
- Mr. Gerard Scully stated that anyone being shortlisted for a Council property would have a Garda check carried out
- Mr. Liam Hanrahan explained that everyone on the short list would be Garda checked. However, because there are a limited number of houses, not everyone who is Garda checked will be allocated a house
- Mr. Enda McGuane queried if the result of the check was valid for a certain amount of time
- Mr. Scully clarified that the result of the Garda check is valid for a period of 12 months and that the checks can be carried out at any time by the Local Authority – allocations of properties have been cancelled in the past due to Garda check results
- Mr. Hanrahan clarified that Garda checks are also used in relation to transfers, additions to tenancies, tenant purchase applications, and all Approved Housing body tenants are vetted
- Cllr Byrne thanked Mr. Gerard Scully for the information in the presentation
- Cllr Jimmy McClearn queried a situation where a husband may be serving a prison sentence, and on release would wish to move into the Council property, where his wife had passed the Garda vetting but there would be problem with the husband's Garda check result
- Mr. Scully acknowledged that there would not be a great number of examples of the situation outlined by Cllr McClearn but that the Housing Department would investigate as much as possible, given that it is difficult to prove if someone is living in the house without permission – a case would be opened by the Tenancy and Estate Management team to carry out the investigation
- Cllr McClearn also pointed out that housing applicants are aware that it is difficult to get a transfer from one Council house to another, and therefore may refuse a property rather than feel they have to stay in the first property if there might be a more suitable property possible

- Mr. Scully confirmed that the refusal rate is high in certain areas where there are new houses being bought/built e.g., Fána Bhuí in Tuam, Tullagh Hill in Loughrea. In relation to transfers Mr. Scully explained that there is no differentiation made between a transfer and an allocation from the housing list – a transfer request may be a couple of years old, but the housing application may be over 10 years old in some cases – the time on the list is the major factor. Mr. Scully pointed out that if there are a large number of transfers that there is less funding available to repairs and maintenance.
- Mr Hanrahan outlined that an analysis of the maintenance budget had shown that it takes approximately €15,000 to bring a vacant unit up to modern standards – it can be more costly if the unit was occupied for a long time, and if the tenant had carried out their own works that need to be rectified
- Cllr Byrne pointed out that there was separate funding for void units
- Mr. Hanrahan confirmed that the maximum funding from the Department per void unit is €11,000 maximum and it cannot be drawn down until the new tenant is in situ
- Ms. Nuala Heffernan explained that voids funding cannot be sought for the same unit for a second time
- Cllr Thomas Welby thanked Mr. Gerard Scully for the details and queried what the percentage refusal rate would be. Cllr Welby queried if it would be possible to reduce a person's HAP contribution if they had a record of refusing offers of social housing, given that the HAP monies are being paid from taxpayer funds. Cllr Welby also asked if targets in relation to Irish speaker allocations are being met in the Gaeltacht areas.
- Mr. Scully explained that the Housing Section does not have any power to reduce the HAP payments, but that the Department are currently looking at the HAP limits and situations where HAP tenants are earning more than the HAP income threshold. Mr. Scully confirmed that the Housing Section cannot currently penalise people if they refuse a property
- In relation to allocations for the Irish speakers, Mr. Gerard Scully stated that there can be difficulties sourcing tenants
- Mr. Hanrahan stressed that it was important that Irish speakers ticked the relevant box on the housing application form as it would be used for sourcing Irish speakers for relevant housing allocations. Mr. Hanrahan also pointed out that it takes some time for the Housing Liaison Officers to arrange meetings to assess the candidates
- Cllr James Charity suggested that a presentation be made to the Councillors in relation to the matrix for Garda checks, and also queried the Council's powers to carry out the checks
- Mr. Hanrahan confirmed that a presentation could be made in relation to the Garda check matrix in the future
- Cllr Byrne queried if a person is in HAP in the city area if they can transfer to another Local Authority
- Ms. Heffernan clarified that a person will only be offered a tenancy with the Local Authority where their application is held but could get HAP with another Local Authority
- Cllr Charity queried the homeless figures in Mr. Scully's presentation

- Mr. Hanrahan clarified that some of the individuals on the homeless list may have been on the housing list already before they became homeless which would affect the dates, and also that some people may be in a hostel, supported accommodation, or in a nursing home
- Cllr Charity pointed out that the fact that someone has become homeless recently and the date used is the date of their initial application affects the accuracy of the homeless statistics
- Mr. Scully stressed that the statistics are compiled at a point in time. They are based on the number of people that are homeless but not by how long they are homeless so the fact that they are longer on the housing list does not affect the accuracy of the homeless statistics
- Mr. Hanrahan explained that the Housing Liaison Officers are aware of the individuals in their area, and that it can be the case that an individual may not want to move
- Cllr Byrne pointed out that the document presented by Mr. Scully is a live document and that the figures will change day by day. Cllr Byrne pointed out that it is very informative information that should be made available to the entire Council. Cllr Byrne suggested that presentations and workshops should be arranged and possible also at Municipal District level
- Mr. Enda McGuane stated that he sits on the board of COPE and that they have the same issues with people on the list in transient housing situations
- Cllr McClearn explained that the definition of homelessness would normally mean that someone would not have a place to sleep, but that the definition is broader as in some cases a person on the homeless list may refuse a property
- Cllr Byrne confirmed that situations such as this arise where properties are offered to people and refused despite their homeless status
- Ms. Nora Corcoran queried if clinics could be arranged for housing applicants in relation to the housing applications forms given that such a large amount are deemed invalid
- Mr. Scully replied that an online application process is currently being developed and that workshops may be arranged when this is introduced
- Ms. Corcoran pointed out that some applicants may not have the technical knowledge to apply online
- Mr. Scully confirmed that there may be some applicants with literacy issues but that the workshops would assist anyone who has any issues

3. Tenancy & Estate Management – presentation by Angela Spelman, Administrative Officer

(PowerPoint presentation has been circulated by email to the SPC and the full Council)

Discussion:

- Cllr James Charity queried the Taking in Charge process for estates
- Cllr Joe Byrne indicated that this matter was outside the remit of the Housing SPC and should be raised at Council level

- Mr. Liam Hanrahan explained that the Taking in Charge of estates does not affect Council tenants directly
- Cllr Jimmy McClearn expressed concerns regarding the housing stock and what is expected of the tenant in terms of tenant responsibilities, and queried whether issues would be acted upon or not, leading to poor upkeep of the units – Cllr McClearn pointed out that there is a contradiction between private landlord responsibilities and the Council’s responsibility as a landlord
- Cllr Byrne agreed that Cllr McClearn had an important point regarding the expectations of private landlord versus what is expected of Council tenants rather than the Council as the landlord
- Mr. Hanrahan explained that the tenant responsibilities have not changed in a number of years – approximately 1,000 houses have been added to the housing stock and the maintenance budget has not been increased
- Mr Hanrahan confirmed that individual cases are discussed and that it is possible in exceptional circumstances that the works can be carried out by the Council with the agreement that the tenant will pay extra on their rent to cover the works
- Mr Hanrahan indicated that a huge policy change would be required to cease the tenant purchase process and to instead retain the houses and move the tenants as their housing needs change over the years – at the moment an allocation is for life if required
- Mr Hanrahan pointed out that a lot of calls to the Maintenance Unit relate to items that could have been solved without contacting the Council and that the maintenance budget is stretched
- Cllr Byrne stated that the Council is reacting to the issues rather than using a Planned Maintenance programme over 20 years like the system in place in Clare County Council
- Mr. Hanrahan clarified that Galway has looked at the Clare County Council model and are currently at the early stages of implementing such a programme given that Galway County Council has allocated a budget of €10 Million for this
- Cllr Byrne welcomed this information on the Planned Maintenance Scheme
- Cllr Thomas Welby queried if there was a policy for re-naming Council estates
- Mr. Hanrahan indicated that there is a place naming committee in place for new estates but that a local plebiscite process would be required for an existing estate to apply to change its name
- Cllr Welby stated that some tenants don’t realise their responsibilities when they sign up for a tenancy
- Mr. Enda McGuane expressed that the number of units cannot be increased without increasing the maintenance budget otherwise a situation may occur similar to the 1970’s when the properties that could not be maintained were sold on
- Cllr McClearn agreed that the responsibilities in the handbook would not work if the maintenance budget was not increased
- Cllr Byrne queried who would be responsible for upkeep such as grass cutting in an estate where there would be a mixture of bought out houses and Council houses e.g. Convent Park in Kinvara
- Ms. Heffernan confirmed that the Council would cut the grass in a Council estate

4. Presentation from Damien Mitchell, Senior Engineer – Capital projects update

(PDF of PowerPoint presentation has been circulated by email to the SPC and the full Council)

Discussion:

- Cllr Joe Byrne thanked Mr. Mitchell for the positive report
- Mr. Liam Hanrahan confirmed that the outlook is positive for a lot of sites that are at various stage of development but confirmed that there are challenges mounting in relation to increased costs.
- Mr. Hanrahan explained that the Department are engaging with the Housing unit, and that some contractors may have cash flow problems
- Mr. Hanrahan confirmed that the additional staff resources are beginning to be engaged and that a new Senior Executive Engineer will be starting in the next few weeks, with a Quantity Surveyor also due to start with the other positions to be filled
- Mr. Hanrahan indicated that Public Private Participation opportunities are being looked at for larger sites
- Mr. Hanrahan also confirmed that Strategic Housing Developments have been approved that were expected to lead to future Part V unit acquisitions – this will be particularly useful in areas around the city boundaries. Mr. Hanrahan also noted that some land locked sites owned by the Council will now be availed of.
- Mr. Hanrahan outlined that there are issues with Irish Water that are hindering development in some towns
- Cllr Jimmy McClearn confirmed that the proposed development at Dunlo Hill, Ballinasloe is a very positive sustainable development as it is clearing up dereliction and providing accommodation in town centres for older people or starter families. Cllr McClearn mentioned that there are areas in the County Development Plan where dereliction can be removed – this may cost more than a green field site.
- Cllr McClearn also queried the method for the calculation of the value of the Part V units to be acquired by the Council
- Cllr James Charity thanked Mr. Mitchell for the presentation and queried how things have changed since the previous Capital update given to the SPC in November regarding the Housing for All targets, and specifically the 40% requirement for the Approved Housing Bodies – Cllr Charity enquired how the costs increasing were affecting the targets
- Cllr Thomas Welby thanked Mr. Mitchell for the update and expressed that any development taking place in the next year will probably be Local Authority or government funded projects as the costs are now phenomenal, and that people are not going to be able to build. Cllr Welby pointed out that everything is affected such as rent which will increase, and quotes for houses have also gone up
- Cllr Joe Byrne asked if Ms. Aimee McGee had any update on figures regarding Approved Housing Bodies

- Ms. Aimee McGee indicated that she did not have any figures at the moment but could confirm that Clúid was undergoing a period of rapid growth and could look at providing figures for the SPC
- Cllr Byrne also noted that the 12-month period for defects should be availed of for newly constructed Turnkey units and that the tenant handbook may need to be adjusted to include this scenario
- Cllr Byrne outlined that the expense of constructing a property is the same not matter if it is being built directly by a Local Authority or by the private sector i.e., on average €1,900 to €2,000 per square metre to deliver a 2-bed house
- Mr. Enda McGuane confirmed that a costing report is being re-done by the Society of Chartered Surveyors and that a meeting had taken place with the LGMA concerning the fact that targets need to be re-visited in relation to construction.
- Ms. McGee agreed that reviews need to take place with regard to seeking further funding, and explained that Clúid schemes at the moment are mostly in the east of the county
- Mr. Damien Mitchell agreed that there are difficulties in price variation and that there are processes now in place to re-visit costs to endeavour to keep the contractors on the sites.
- Mr. Mitchell outlined that some of the Turnkey submissions received related to projects that are not compatible with our housing demand.
- Mr. Mitchell confirmed that the capital targets appear to be on schedule for this year but next year is not clear at the moment – lands have been purchased and works are in progress
- Mr. Mitchell clarified that in relation to the Part V units that the costs of the contractor are sought along with our independent quantity surveyor costings, and negotiations and then carried out followed by applications for funding from the Department
- Cllr Byrne pointed out that the developers cannot engage with the Council in relation to Turnkey developments until they have received planning permission and that perhaps it would be better if they could make contact earlier at the pre-planning stage, but this may open the developments up to objections during the planning application process
- Mr. Gerard Scully indicated that the housing data map needs to be publicised for the developers to see the housing need for the various locations

5. Annual Work Programme – priorities for next meeting

- Cllr James Charity queried if the Control of Horses byelaws were going to be discussed at the next meeting
- Mr. Liam Hanrahan replied that the Council had looked in to fencing off land at the Curragh Line and that the draft byelaw needs to be reviewed and brought forward for adoption
- Cllr Joe Byrne indicated that he would engage with the executive in relation to Housing for All and the next SPC meeting

6. Any Other Business

The next Housing SPC meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, 7th September 2022 at 10am in the Council Chamber