

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE NA GAILLIMHE

Minutes of Housing, Culture and Recreation SPC Meeting held in Room G01,
County Hall, Friday, 16th September 2016, at 11.00a.m.

I Láthair:-

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

Oifigigh: Mr. P. Gavican, D.O.S
Ms. J. Brann, S.E.O. Housing
Mr. M. Owens, S.E.O, Corporate Services
Mr. M. Sheil, S.E.E. Housing
Ms. J. Gibbons, S.O. Housing
Ms. M. Flaherty, C.O. Housing

Apologies were received and noted from Ms. Margaret Jordan, Mr. Tom Doherty and Ms. Helena McElmeel.

A vote of sympathy was proposed by Cllr. Fahy, seconded by Cllr. Hynes & Cllr. McHugh on the tragic passing of Cllr. McHugh's nephew Jack McHugh.

1. Minutes of Meeting held on 16th June 2016

The minutes of the meeting held on 16th June 2016 were adopted on the proposal of Cllr. Fahy, seconded by Cllr. Hynes.

Matters Arising

None

2. Progress on Social Housing Strategy

Mr. Sheil gave an update on the Social Housing Strategy and progress to date in relation to construction. He advised on the status of the 5 schemes in working progress: Weir Road Tuam, 31 houses currently with Planning and to go before the October Council meeting; Gilmartin Road 32 units whereby there has been discussions with the Department in terms of design and it will be moving to next stage of lodging the planning application in November; Garbally Drive 10 units & Esker 2 units are with Planning and the decision is due shortly; 5 Rurals, 2 at tender stage and 3 to go to Part 8 shortly.

Ms. Brann gave an update on acquisitions for 2016 advising that 31 contracts have been signed, 8 closed and a further 38 are at various stages beyond sale agreed. She advised that under the current expenditure programme Galway County Council have acquired 131 units

around the County which are to come on stream within the next year to year and a half. Ms. Brann advised that under the CAS Call 2016, 8 proposals have been received totalling 28 units, 5 proposals (totalling 14 units) have been approved under delegated sanction from the Department, and 3 proposals (totalling 14 units) have to be submitted to the Department for approval as they exceed the finance threshold for delegated sanction.

3. Differential Rent Review Update

Ms. Gibbons circulated a presentation on the review of the Differential Rent Scheme which outlined the comparisons to other Local Authority on different areas i.e. max rent rates by County (giving examples), treatment of occupants (subsidiary earners), dependents and pensioners in the calculation of rents and the Ballinasloe former Town Council rent scheme.

Ms. Gibbons advised that upon comparison each Council calculates rent differently, therefore not comparing like with like. She advised that each Council has different max rents, treats income from occupants (subsidiary earners) differently and the assessment of pensioners differently.

Ms. Gibbons outlined the findings, them being that under max rent Galway County Council is low (€86pw) in comparison to other Councils, for example Galway City Council is €180.30pw. She also advised that in the calculation of rent for pensioners Galway County Council has a capped rate of €27 regardless of income which is most generous when compared to other Local Authorities, with a rate of €32.90/€35.10.

Ms. Gibbons explained that there are 279 rent accounts to be assessed under the Ballinasloe former Town Council Rent Scheme. She advised that the scheme results in the rents generally being lower and that transfer of these tenants to Galway County Councils scheme would result in an average weekly increase of €4.40 per household (based on analysis of 183 households whose rents were assessed under both schemes).

Ms. Gibbons concluded with some points for consideration. She re-advised that the max rent of Galway County Council is low by comparison to other Councils. She said that only the higher income households benefit from the max rent cap i.e. those where the tenant is earning over €435 net per week and noted that subsidiary earners contribute a max of €16pw regardless of income. Ms. Gibbons suggested that an increase in max rent may incentivise take up of the Tenant Purchase Scheme/Mortgage Allowance Scheme. She also suggested the standardising of rents across Galway County Council to include former Ballinasloe Town Council tenants.

Cllr. Fahy expressed concerns for Old Age Pensioners and the increase to their rents. Ms. Gibbons advised that the OAP's are not affected as their rent is capped at €27pw. Mr. McKeon agreed that Ballinasloe Town Council tenants' rents should be under Galway County Council. He queried if the administration of the rents is done under Galway County Council as it is to which Ms. Gibbons advised it is. Cllr. McHugh queried if the Ballinasloe rents are paid into Galway County Council, Ms. Gibbons confirmed that they are.

Mr. Gavican advised that the Differential Rent Review Update presents to the members the anomalies that exist and he suggested that a subgroup should be created to examine the

issues further. He advised that the max rent needs serious consideration from the low to higher earners and also the bringing into line of Ballinasloe Town Council rents with Galway County Council. Mr. Gavican advised that a national differential rent scheme has been discussed however it is not clear as to when it will come on stream.

Cllr. McHugh agreed that a Subgroup should be formed with the purpose of looking at the rent currently applied and alterations that could be made. Mr. Gavican agreed saying that in particular, occupants and independents need to be looked at in comparison to neighbouring Authorities.

Cllr. Killilea agreed that it is important to look at rents in relation to higher earners. He queried that if rents are brought into line would whatever costs recovered from the increase pass to lower earners. Mr. Gavican said that this is difficult to answer. He advised that the higher earners are getting a serious break on the current scheme and that it is of great importance that more serious consideration is given to the lower earners. He stressed that this along with bringing Ballinasloe Town Council rents into line are 2 fundamentals to be looked at.

Cllr. Fahy queried if there is a Tenant Purchase Scheme to give tenants the opportunity to purchase their house. Mr. Gavican advised that there is a new Tenant Purchase Scheme in place for tenants to avail of. He said that a number of applications under the new scheme have been received. Mr. Gavican suggested that the max rent increase would be an incentive to purchase through Tenant Purchase.

Cllr. McHugh suggested a subgroup be formed and asked what number of people it should consist of. Ms. Brann suggest 3-4 people. Cllr. McHugh was nominated to form part of the subgroup on the proposal of Cllr. Fahy, seconded by Cllr. Killilea. Cllr. Killilea was nominated on the proposal of Cllr. Fahy and seconded by Cllr. Mannion. Ms. Gibbons and Ms. Brann will also form part of the subgroup. The subgroup agreed to meet separately to go through the workings in more detail.

4. Housing Conference Review

Ms. Gibbons gave a brief synopsis on the success of the Housing conference. She advised that there was a turnout of approximately 120 people on the day with a broad range of representation from Approved Housing Bodies (Cluid, Tuath, Respond); Architects from over 15 firms (Scott Tallon Walker Architects, HA Boyle & Co, John Buckley Architects); Charitable Organisations and the homeless services (Galway Simon, Brothers of Charity, Cope Galway and the Galway Older Peoples Council); Construction Companies / Developers (Construction Industry Federation, O'Malley Construction); Engineering Firms (Evolution Geotechnical Engineering, Tobin Consulting Engineers, RPS Consulting); along with the Banking Sector and Officials from other Local Authorities.

Ms. Gibbons advised that attendees were most forthcoming with feedback on the day. The opinion from the AHBs was that attracting more AHB's to Galway may increase the supply of housing. The issue of a prolonged planning process was raised as one of the main barriers. She also advised that the option of a greater availability of finance was suggested along with the possibility of introducing rent controls. Ms. Gibbons said that

people were in favour of creating a voluntary group of both the public and private sector to identify solutions and how to achieve them.

Ms. Gibbons read out an email on behalf of Ms. EcElmeel who was unable to attend the meeting. Ms. McElmeel advised that on foot of the suggestion of creating a voluntary group, that a subgroup be created consisting of 3 people minimum to hold meetings outside of the SPC. Cllr. Killilea suggested this be done within the SPC. Cllr. McHugh agreed and advised if an additional SPC meeting needs to take place to accommodate this that it will. Ms. Brann suggested an SPC meeting be held in October. Ms. Gibbons advised that the feedback from the Housing event will be circulated in advance of that meeting.

5. Any Other Business

Cllr. McHugh queried if a letter on the Tenant Purchase Scheme was issued to the Department and if any response had been received. Ms. Brann advised that the letter issued and awaiting a response. Cllr. McHugh advised that the Tenant Purchase Scheme should be made more available to people who want it. He said that the €15,000 that people have to prove they have from their earnings is causing a problem. Mr. Gavican clarified that the €15,000 is not 100% from earnings, he explained that 50% is earnings and 50% Social Welfare. Cllr. Mannion queried how long a person needs to be in employment. Ms. Brann advised that every case is different. Cllr. McHugh said there is a lack of knowledge out there in the public in relation to the workings of the scheme and suggested a person be put in place to provide same. Mr. Gavican advised that there are information packs available stipulating the process along with local authority staff who are taking calls on same.

Cllr. Mannion queried if there were delays on valuations for Tenant Purchase applications. Mr. Gavican advised that a new framework for valuations is currently being looked at given that Auctioneers are extremely busy at present. He explained that Galway County Council are keeping the pressure on Auctioneers to get the valuations done as quickly as possible. Cllr. Mannion queried if 2 valuations are needed per house to which Mr. Gavican advised that only 1 is needed and that the Local Authority gets the valuation. Cllr. McHugh queried if the Local Authority can agree a set fee with the Auctioneers to which Mr. Gavican advised that is currently being done. Cllr. Killilea suggested putting in place a property valuation listing whereby the Council invite Auctioneers to express their interest to be included on the listing. This listing is then given to the tenant and they have the responsibility to arrange the valuation, with the valuation cost to be reclaimed when the invoice is received. Cllr. McHugh queried if procurement would effect this process. Mr. Gavican said this was a good suggestion and something that would have to be looked into.

Cllr. Mannion queried since the introduction of the new Tenant Purchase Scheme if any new purchases have gone through. Mr. Gavican advised that there are numerous applications but is not sure if any have gone fully through the prices yet.

Cllr. Hynes queried the HAP process whereby he was made aware of a tenant who is trying to source accommodation under the scheme and was told they are confined to a 2 bed which is none existent within the area they are looking. Cllr. McHugh advised that the only constraint within the HAP scheme are the caps on the monies. He suggested that the person find what accommodation suits, the rent is the first hurdle and then talk to housing.

He suggested that the advice may be conflicted. Ms. Brann advised Cllr. Hynes to speak directly to the HAP team as this is an individual case.

Mr. Gavican circulated a document which was presented to the Minister entitled “A Framework for Collaboration” – An agreement between the Arts Council and the County and City Management Association. Mr. Gavican advised that the partnership between and the Arts Council and Local Government, and a shared approach where appropriate, to investment and development, will strengthen the arts in Ireland whereby they will optimise their shared investment in the arts at local and regional level, ensuring they are applying resources in the most equitable and efficient way possible creating leverage and an opportunity to explore new models of investment. He explained that the basis for this agreement is to make clear their respective commitments to arts development and, in particular, to strive for equality of access to and engagement in the arts by all those living in Ireland.

Mr. Gavican explained that the agreement serves a commitment to working collaboratively in three 3 year cycles over a period of 10 years, beginning in 2016. The partnership and the agreement will be fully reviewed in the final year 2025. There will be 2 groups, the first being the Management Liaison Group who will select the strategic actions to be carried out in the first 3 year cycle and thereafter, the second being the Working Group who will then undertake the actions as directed by the MLG and devise/implement action plans to address them.

Cllr. Mannion welcomed the agreement and commended the Council on their support for the Clifden Arts Festival down through the years with it being one of the longest running community festivals.

Cllr. Hynes highlighted the East Galway Family History Society which is running for circa 30 years and in the past had got funding from Galway County Council. He advised that the training aspect of the operation has been brought to an end and asked if there is funding available for training. Cllr. McHugh suggested obtaining training under the social employment scheme. Cllr. Hynes agreed and asked if a funding request could be made and who to direct it to. Cllr. McHugh said a funding request can be made however there is a fraying budget for this area. He advised to direct the request to Michael Owens, County Secretary.

Mr. Gavican informed the SPC that he would be leaving Galway County Council on a secondment to the Department working with Minister Coveney on the Action Plan for Housing. He thanked all the committee members for their hard work on the various schemes throughout his time in Housing.

Cllr. McHugh wished Mr. Gavican well in his new role and advised him to relish the opportunity. He said it is a huge loss to Galway County Council and the Department's gain. Cllr. Killilea also expressed his well wishes and thanked Mr. Gavican for his courtesy towards him as new Councillor, his fellow Councillors and members of the SPC. He commended Mr. Gavican and his team for the ability to drive new projects and schemes with particular emphasis on the Tuam area and the swift progress being made in relation to the new housing scheme. Cllr. Mannion said the news has come with great sadness to be losing Mr. Gavican, acknowledging the work he done overhauling the housing area along with his team. She said it will be a huge loss to Galway County

Council however an opportunity for his expertise to shine at national level. She wished him well in his new role. Cllr. Fahy agreed and said Mr. Gavican was a breath of fresh air to the Housing unit and will be greatly missed.

Cllr. Hynes expressed his shock at the news of Mr. Gavican leaving, commended him on his work, courtesy and the immense progress he had made within the Housing area. He wished him well in his new role. Mr. McKeon agreed and commended his work ethic and manner.

It was agreed that the next meeting will take place in October, date and time to be confirmed.

This concluded the business of the meeting.