

WEXFORD COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of Meeting of Wexford County Council
held on Thursday 28th September, 2017 – 10.00 a.m.
in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Wexford.**

Attendance:

In the Chair: Cllr. J. Hegarty, Cathaoirleach.

Councillors:

P. Breen;	M. Byrne;	G. Carthy;	K. Codd Nolan
A. Connick;	T. Dempsey;	A. Donohoe,	K. Doyle,
M. Farrell;	W. Fitzharris;	J. Fleming	R. Ireton;
P. Kavanagh;	W. Kavanagh;	A. Kelly;	G. Lawlor
L. McDonald;	J. Moore;	BA Murphy,	M. Murphy;
J. Mythen	L. O'Brien;	O. O'Connell;	J. O'Rourke
M. Roche;	M. Sheehan;	F. Staples	J. Sullivan;
D. Wadding;	O. Walsh;	M. Whelan.	

Officials:

Mr. T. Enright, Chief Executive;
Mr. T. Larkin, Director of Services;
Mr. E. Hore, Director of Services
Mr. J. Carley, Director of Services;
Ms. A. O'Neill, Head of Finance & ICT;
Mr. S. Begley, A/Head of Finance;
Mr. P. Collins, County Secretary.

Apologies:

Cllr. D. Hynes;
Cllr. F. Ó Súilleabháin;

The Cathaoirleach welcomed the Members to the meeting which is convened to decide on the LPT Variation for 2018. On the proposal of Cllr. K. Codd Nolan seconded by Cllr. K. Doyle it was agreed to hold the meeting in committee to allow full and frank discussion.

1. Minutes of Corporate Policy Group/Budget Working Group 18.09.17:

On the proposal of Councillor P. Kavanagh, seconded by Councillor J. Moore, the minutes of the CPG/Budget Working Group were adopted by the Council.

The Cathaoirleach stated that the Chief Executive Mr. T. Enright would make a brief statement to the meeting and that this would be followed by a presentation by Mr. T. Larkin, Director of Services. The Head of Finance would then present on the Budget 2018 – Strategy Discussion. The Cathaoirleach also explained that the Press would be invited to join the meeting before the vote on LPT.

The Chief Executive advised that the purpose of the meeting was to set the LPT Variation Rate for 2018 but that budget measures would also be discussed. He highlighted a number of challenges facing County Wexford:

- High unemployment;

- 17% of working people in Wexford had to leave the county to go to work every day.
- Wexford also has some of the most socially disadvantaged areas in the country.
- Wexford was exporting its young people to other centres for education and employment.
- The County has a dated tourism product which needs to be updated.

There is now a unique chance to turn this situation around. The County has a lot of assets but needs to make better use of those assets and this can be done by putting investment in place to move projects ahead quickly. However, it will require a number of increases in Budget 2018 to provide the necessary finance.

The Chief Executive advised that Director. T. Larkin will make a presentation with regard to the major projects currently planned or in progress throughout the county. While he understood that Councillors will be expected to defend the budget increases in front of the general public, he insisted that increases are the right thing to do to enable the county to make significant progress on the projects that will boost County Wexford's economy and lead to increased job prospects for the county.

He had no doubt that County Wexford would have significant job announcements in the future but the Council needs to put investment in place quickly to keep ahead of other counties. Investment in these projects will place the county in a strong position to make a real difference and presents a once in a generation opportunity to improve the quality of life for the citizens of County Wexford.

Mr. T. Larkin, Director of Services, then delivered a comprehensive presentation on the projects in progress at present as per the attached document. He advised that employment creation is the Council's main priority.

The Cathaoirleach stated that the Council needs to have the vision to show what kind of County we will have in 5 years time.

Arising from the presentation a number of Councillors raised issues about a wide ranging number of subjects including the following:

- An economic analysis of how infrastructure will impact on the Councils economic programme. The Chief Executive noted that projects will be brought forward individually with analysis of their impact on the county.
- The marina in Wexford Town will be part of an overall package of development which will be primarily office and retail spaces but will require amenity areas as well
- It was also requested that T. Larkin's presentation should be set out before the general public - it is intended that Town Hall style meetings would be held in each town to set out the Council's vision to the general public.
- Discussion also took place on the cost to the Council in providing the infrastructure at the Innovation Centre in Gorey.
- The link between economic development and housing was also emphasised
- The Chief Executive advised that the Council was considering a low cost mortgage package for people on lower incomes
- The hope generated by the programme and the need for urban renewal in the town centres.

2. Budget 2018 – Strategy Discussion (In-Committee):

Ms. A. O'Neill, Head of Finance & ICT, then delivered the attached presentation outlining the budget strategy set out in the document circulated to members and discussed by the Cross Party/CPG meeting. She gave an overview of the matters discussed at the Cross Party Meeting and set out the financial considerations to be taken into account for 2018. She advised that the LPT variation cannot be seen in isolation and that she would advise Members of a number of other issues that would form the basis of the 2018 Budget.

The Head of Finance also advised that the Council had gone out to public consultation with regard to the LPT variation and had received 3 submissions which had been notified to the Members for their consideration in respect of the decision on the LPT rate for 2018.

The Head of Finance recommended a 10% increase in the LPT Variation rate for 2018.

She also made a number of other proposals:

Rates on vacant premises: a 90% refund/relief scheme to replace the 100% scheme current in place is recommended where sufficient evidence is provided to confirm efforts to Lease/Sell the property.

General Municipal Allocation (GMA): Maintain GMA levels at the 2017 adopted levels at a minimum and consider increase where additional income is available.

Rates Harmonisation: The Head of Finance gave a detailed presentation with regard to the lack of sustainability of rates harmonisation at an annual movement of 2.9% and put forward proposals for the acceleration of the rates harmonisation process including a Special Rates Incentive Scheme (SRIS) which will ease the harmonisation proposal for the two remaining former town rating areas, Enniscorthy and New Ross. Full harmonisation will allow the council to consider a rate increase for the whole County.

Base Rate: Increase the base ARV by 3% from 71.52 to 73.67.

Following the presentation a wide ranging discussion took place with regard to the topics raised. The Cathaoirleach complimented both the Head of Finance and Mr. T. Larkin on their presentations and this was echoed by a number of the Members.

The Cathaoirleach advised that there is only one decision to be taken today which was the adoption of the variation rate for the LPT. A decision in principle regarding the other matters was required to assist the framing of the overall budget.

Among the matters raised was that the proposed investment programme for the county needs to be widely communicated to the general public.

Members raised the issue of progress on the investment programme over the coming years and asked that quarterly progress reports be made to the Council. They emphasised that if money and staff are made available to fund the programme, members expected a return in the form of results on the ground over the next 2 years

Particular emphasis was placed on the need for large scale investment in New Ross and Enniscorthy. Members felt that both towns were falling behind Wexford and Gorey and

they both required urgent investment to stem the decline. The need for ambition and a vision for the County were also discussed.

A number of Members raised concerns that the proposed increases may have a deleterious effect on a number of companies and retail businesses in the county, given that they are operating on very low margins.

A number of Councillors advised that they would not be in a position to vote for the proposed LPT increase and set out the difficulties faced by small businesses in Wexford, including problems with planning and the Rates Incentive Scheme. Reference was made to the reduction of household income throughout the county and that the proposed increases could be quite expensive when added together.

Following an assertion that the Council was doing nothing for small business in the county, the Chief Executive stated that he profoundly disagreed with this assertion and pointed to the work being carried out by the Local Enterprise Office and the office space recently made available for small business in the Hatch Lab in Gorey.

A number of Members spoke of giving hope to young people that they will be able to find good employment in County Wexford. Many Members also referred to the need for ambition and a vision for the county and the need for the programme to be successful.

Among other issues raised were the following:

Dealing with some of the projects on a phased basis.

The proportion of the increase which would be directed to the GMA.

The need to communicate clearly with the Districts in relation to projects being carried out in their area.

Change in the role of enterprise in the community.

The cutting of the block grant since 2013 and discounts to rate payers were also highlighted as issues as to why the Council's income has fallen.

High unemployment rate in County Wexford which stands at 2.9% above the national average.

People spending power is also at an all time low.

Criticism of the LPT which is seen as an aggressive tax.

Increases in the LPT with regard to 2019 – The Chief Executive agreed that no further increases will be sought next year but that the Council would want to hold the 10% LPT proposed for 2018 in 2019 and also hold the rate increase of 3% in 2019.

Prior to the vote the Chief Executive thanked Mr. T. Larkin, Director of Services for his presentation and agreed that the level of communication on the Council's Investment programme needs to be improved. He highlighted the vision underlying the Programme - vision requires foresight and the ability to take risk.

To achieve the vision set out in the Programme, the County needs to generate extra income - an extra €600,000 income allows Wexford County Council to borrow in the region of €10m over a 20 year period at low fixed rates. The Chief Executive advised that he had held a meeting yesterday with the four Chambers of Commerce in the county and that they fully supported the increase in rates to achieve the items set out in the Programme.

The Council went into public session prior to the vote on LPT Variation.

On the proposal of Cllr. P. Kavanagh seconded by Cllr. M. Byrne a motion to increase the LPT by 10%,

a second proposal by Cllr. J. Mythen seconded by Cllr. A. Kelly was to decrease the LPT by 3% and

a third motion by Cllr. D. Wadding was to decrease the LPT by 15%.

A vote was taken on the first proposal to increase the LPT by 10% i.e. a 5% increase on the LPT agreed in 2017 for the purposes of investment for job creation opportunities and to provide a new dynamic in the County.

Following a roll call the motion was adopted by 21 voting in favour and 9 against as follows:

Councillors: P. Breen, M. Byrne, G. Carthy, K. Codd Nolan, T. Dempsey, A. Donohoe, K. Doyle, M. Farrell, W. Fitzharris, J. Hegarty, R. Ireton, P. Kavanagh, W. Kavanagh, G. Lawlor, J. Moore, B.A. Murphy, M. Murphy, L. O'Brien, M. Sheehan, F. Staples, O. Walsh.

Those voting against: Councillors: A. Connick, A. Kelly, L. McDonald, J. Mythen, O. O'Connell, M. Roche, J. Sullivan, D. Wadding, M. Whelan.

Councillor not in attendance for vote – Councillors J. Fleming, D. Hynes, J. O'Rourke, F. ÓSúilleabháin.

The Cathaoirleach then brought the meeting to a conclusion and stated that this was the start of a couple of difficult months for Councillors but that a leap of faith is required to put forward the vision set out in the Programme. It is important that the Councillors work together to achieve the plan and while it is a difficult decision he is proud to be a Councillor on the day when this proposal has been adopted.

This concluded the business of the meeting.

County Secretary

Daingithe ar an la de , 2017.

Cathaoirleach