

WEXFORD COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of Special Meeting of Wexford County Council
held on Friday 10th November, 2017 – 3.00 p.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
T. Dempsey;	M. Farrell;	W. Fitzharris;	J. Fleming
D. Hynes;	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	F. Ó Súilleabháin;	M. Roche;
M. Sheehan;	J. Sullivan;	O. Walsh;	M. Whelan.

Mr. T. Walsh, People Before Profit, attended the meeting as an observer.

T.D. James Browne, TD

Officials:

Mr. T. Enright, Chief Executive;
Mr. E. Hore, Director of Services
Mr. J. Carley, Director of Services;
Mr. E. Taaffe, Director of Services;
Mr. P. O'Gorman, SEO, Housing;
Mr. S. Howell, County Architect;
Mr. P. Collins, County Secretary;
Mr. N. McCabe, AO, Housing;
Ms. M. Donoghue, AO, Housing;
Ms. H. Meehan, SSO, Housing;
Ms. N. Cummins, SSO, Housing;
Ms. M. Bridges-Carley, SSO Housing;
Ms. C. Creane, SSO Housing;
Mr. B. Wadding, SO Housing;
Ms. H. Redmond, SO, Housing.

A.H.B.'s:

Ms. M. Butler, Cooperative Housing Ireland;
Mr. G. Corcoran, Cooperative Housing Ireland;
Mr. P. Clancy, Cooperative Housing Ireland;
Mr. N. Brennan, Respond;
Mr. L. Fewer, Respond;
Ms. A. Gallagher, Tuath;
Ms. N. Hardy, Tuath;
Mr. P. Coyle, Oaklee Housing.

Apologies:

Mr. B. Howlin, TD; Mr. M. D'Arcy, TD, Mr. P. Kehoe, TD.
Cllr. F. Staples, Cllr. A. Donohoe, Cllr. K. Doyle, Cllr. A. Connick,
Mr. A. Shute, Cluid.

On the proposal of Cllr. G. Lawlor seconded by Cllr. P. Kavanagh it was agreed that the Special Meeting be held in-committee to facilitate a full and frank discussion.

1. Welcome

The Cathaoirleach welcomed all of the attendees to the meeting and said that the excellent attendance reflected the current concern about the housing crisis. He advised that it was an opportunity for a genuine discussion to help to solve the crisis and that the meeting should aim for solutions.

He advised that all the relevant facts had been supplied by the Housing Department and that all ideas for speeding up the process and amending the focus would be considered at today's meeting.

2. Approved Housing Bodies:

The Approved Housing Bodies then each gave a short presentation with regards to the work they are carrying out in County Wexford and answered questions from the Members of the Council. Among the matters dealt with were:

- The right to ownership of voluntary housing and the opportunity to buy out properties
- The deficiencies in the education system led to people not having jobs and incomes to buy houses
- The lack of contact for public representatives with housing associations
- The policy of the housing associations with regard to anti social behavior and belligerent tenants
- The criteria for choosing tenants for approved housing bodies
- The number of empty units and turnaround times for occupying vacant units
- The filling of flats in the old convent building in New Ross
- The working relationship between the associated housing bodies and Wexford County Council
- In relation to homelessness the number of associated housing units available for North County Wexford
- Loans approved in 2016 for associated housing bodies

The Cathaoirleach then thanked the Associated Housing Bodies for attending the meeting and praised them for their ongoing work with regard to housing.

The Chief Executive also thanked the AHB's for attending and advised the meeting that there was a lot of co-operation and a close working relationship between the AHB's and Wexford County Council and he looked forward to their part in delivering housing in County Wexford in the future.

Mr. J. Carley, Director of Services, then echoed the Chief Executive's thanks and the AHB's left the meeting.

3. Wexford County Council Housing Supply Programme 2017–2019 Progress Report

Mr. J. Carley, Director of Services, then introduced the presentation. He advised that 2,800 housing solutions would be delivered in the next 3 years. He pointed out the Council will be working closely with the Associated Housing Bodies and would be looking to work with developers to deliver the housing solutions.

Mr. P. O’Gorman, SEO Housing, then delivered a presentation to the Members updated to the end of October 2017. The presentation had previously been circulated to the Members.

The Chief Executive then acknowledged and commended the Housing Staff for the work that they do, often in difficult circumstances and also advised the Members that he had put a proposal to the Department regarding a low rate mortgage proposal.

The Council is committed to delivering social housing units but noted that the Council must pay premium prices for land, must pay architects, go through the tender process and prices and pay a lot of money to provide social housing. The rents received by the Council are not market rents. Repairs to Local Authority houses are also expensive and houses are sold off at a discounted rate.

The Chief Executive advised that he had identified a group of people whose incomes are too high for social housing but too low for a bank loan and that it was his proposal that Wexford County Council get back into the mortgage market to provide loans for this group at a fixed rate.

He thanked the housing and finance staff for assisting him with putting this proposal together. The proposal to pilot the loans in conjunction with three other Local Authorities is going to the Department for approval. The proposal is that loan applicants will pay back 2% interest for 25 years as a fixed mortgage. The Council will borrow €12m initially.

These loans will be for new houses only to a maximum of €250,000. This will allow people who get mortgages to have certainty in respect their repayments in the future. There will also be mortgage protection insurance. If the proposal is accepted by the Department it will be an important initiative and help stop the drift for working people into the social housing area.

If Department approval is received it is hoped to advertise the scheme early next year. If the Council had a number of people signed up to the scheme, it would be in a very strong position to negotiate with developers.

The Chief Executive advised that while the Council is looking for new companies to locate in Wexford it would be extremely helpful to say that new housing and low cost mortgages are also available. There would be an additional bonus for developers and their workforces coming into Wexford.

The proposal could also kick start the building industry and free up rental accommodation which would have a knock on effect for social housing applicants. The Chief Executive is confident that the scheme could be got up and running very quickly and it would help to solve the housing crisis, particularly helping people to provide housing for their own families.

The Chief Executive finished by saying that a lot of progress had been made in housing and it is the top priority for the Council and the Elected Members. The Programme set out before the Members today is an ambitious programme but one that the Council intends to deliver.

Members of the Council then raised a number of issues which were answered by Council Officials in attendance. All the Members thanked the housing staff for their hard work and efforts to re-house people on an ongoing basis and dealing with many difficult situations. They also thanked the Chief Executive for his initiative with regard to providing mortgages for people on incomes which would not allow them to get a bank loan.

Included in the issues raised were the following:

- The difference between the number of households and families in the county
- Bed & Breakfast figures
- The use of monies received from the tenant purchase scheme
- The turnkey projects proposed are mostly in the urban area
- Refusal of housing allocations
- Infrastructure deficits effecting the delivery of housing units in certain locations
- Vacant units
- Could the Chief Executive's initiative be used to occupy houses in unfinished estates?
- An investigation of all vacant houses
- The need for serviced land in the future particularly in around the towns and villages
- Repair and leasing solutions for town centers
- The need to populate town centers
- Taking a tough line on refusal of housing solutions
- The population grids and the need for sheltered housing and housing for the disabled in the future
- Need for inspections regarding the repair and maintenance of housing to protect the Council's assets
- The cost of building control to development
- Downsizing options for elderly people
- Housing allocations refusals due to anti social behavior in certain estates
- Unhappiness with a number of Members regarding the HAP scheme
- Legal system causing delays for house purchases
- Over dependence on the HAP scheme
- Lack of houses for sale in the market at present
- Lack of serviced land – the government are slow to release money for housing
- The use of vacant houses for short term emergency accommodation
- The effect of homelessness on children and their families
- The need for security of tenure
- The problem of construction
- The delay in building houses which takes at least 2 years
- The problem with procurement slowing up the purchase of houses
- The need to transfer the approval of new housing from the Department back to the Council on a pilot scheme
- The difficulty for divorced people on reentering the housing market and legal solutions to assist those people
- Building regulations not causing delay in the provision of housing
- The need for all houses to be built to a high standard

On the proposal of Cllr. R. Ireton seconded by Cllr. M. Sheehan it was agreed to suspend Standing Orders and for the meeting to continue to 6pm.

- The difficulty for people who presented at the housing clinics that are still in great difficulty with regard to homelessness and the need for re-housing
- The possibility for WCC setting up its own local associated housing body.
- It was agreed following discussion that a review of refusals will take place at the end of 2017 to ascertain the reasons why people are refusing houses and that this matter will be reported to the Housing, Community & Environment SPC for further consideration.
- The higher standards for the private sector than the public sector in the provision of housing.
- The huge resources required and paperwork associated with the housing needs assessment
- The need to get tougher with anti social behavior

4. Councillors Housing Queries

The Members had submitted queries to the Housing Department over the past number of weeks which were documented and responses given to all questions. This document was circulated to the Members for their information.

5. Deferred Notices of Motion

5.1 Cllr. F. ÓSúilleabháin:

“This Council acknowledges that we are in the midst of housing and homelessness crisis, and over the coming months will establish a point of contact for housing emergencies on weekends”

Following notification that a procedure for a point of contact for housing emergencies on weekends and out of hours is in place the motion was withdrawn by Cllr. F. ÓSúilleabháin.

5.2 Cllr. D. Hynes

“The recent announcement to take over vacant houses and renovate these is to be welcomed as part of addressing the houses crisis but it can only be done if the finance is made available and the each vacant house in Wexford ear marked by the Council for such renovation is matched by the finance, otherwise it is just more spin”.

The above motion was proposed by Cllr. D. Hynes seconded by Cllr. J. Mythen and agreed by all.

5.3 Cllr. D. Hynes

“This Council supports Social Justice Ireland call on Minister Eoghan Murphy to put plans in place for than 90,000 social homes and apartments needed to be built in the next five years and agrees that current attempts to solve the unprecedented problem and heart breaking problem have failed abysmally in light of recent deaths”.

The above motion was proposed by Cllr. D. Hynes seconded by Cllr. F. ÓSúilleabháin and agreed by all.

5.4 Cllr. L. McDonald

“In view of the chronic housing situation, Wexford County Council hereby requests the government to depart from their current policy of reviews, reports and summits and to reintroduce a serious policy of building social houses”.

The above motion was proposed by Cllr. L. McDonald seconded by Cllr. M. Sheehan and agreed by all.

5.5 Cllr. M. Sheehan

“That this Council declares its full support for the Housing section and full confidence in the capacity of the Management team to deliver the adopted Housing Programme and initiatives. Furthermore, this Council would like to express our appreciation to the entire staff for being able to continue to deliver this service in very difficult conditions”.

The above motion was proposed by Cllr. M. Sheehan seconded by Cllr. L. McDonald and agreed by all.

6. Any Other Business:

Mr. J. Carley, Director of Services, thanked the Housing staff for the work they had done and the considerable resources that had been allocated to provide the documents circulated to the Members for this meeting. He noted that many of the cases are difficult for the housing staff and Members alike and that the housing staff is doing their best. They will continue with the programme to deliver as many housing solutions as possible over the next 3 years.

Cllr. J. Mythen then raised the issue of Garda Vetting for Members. The Chief Executive advised that Garda Vetting is not required for Members but that they can do so if they wish, particularly if they are engaging with young people as part of their duties as a Councillor.

The Cathaoirleach advised Members that the QPR Training for Member will take place on Monday 13th November at 11 a.m.

Cllr. L. O’Brien asked that a Press Release be made arising from the meeting to advise the public of the good things that had been discussed. The Chief Executive advised that a press release has been drafted.

He also advised that there would be a live radio broadcast from the Hatch Lab on South East Radio next week and that a draft brochure will be circulated at Monday's meeting.

Cllr. Sheehan raised an issue of data protection with the release of information on the housing list. The County Secretary advised that he would look into this further but that his immediate reaction was that it would not be possible to continue to giving this information out under the new GDPR regulations which come into effect next year.

The Cathaoirleach and Members then welcomed Eddie Taaffe back to Wexford County Council and looked forward to working with him in the future.

The Cathaoirleach concluded the meeting by associating himself with all of the compliments made to the housing staff by the Members.

This concluded the business of the meeting.

County Secretary

Daingithe ar an la de Nollaig, 2017.

Cathaoirleach