

**Minutes of the Rural Development Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) held on
Tuesday 17th November at 3pm in the Council Chamber and via Zoom**

In attendance:

Cllr. Pat Hayes
Cllr. Shane Talty
Cllr. Cillian Murphy
Cllr. Joe Killeen
Cllr. Mary Howard
Cllr. Pat Burke
Mr. Eugene Crimmins
Ms. Anny Wise
Mr. Denis Tuohy
Mr. Leonard Cleary
Ms. Bernadette Haugh
Ms. Helen Moloney

Organisation:

Chair
Elected Member
Elected Member
Elected Member
Elected Member
Elected Member
Community/Voluntary
Environment/Conservation
Agriculture/Farming
Director of Service, Rural Development
A/Senior Executive Officer
Assistant Staff Officer

Apologies:

Ms. Jean Tierney O’Keeffe

Social Inclusion

At the outset Cllr. P. Hayes welcomed everyone to the meeting and stated that it was his first meeting chaired via zoom and apologised for being unable to attend in person.

No. 1 Minutes of Meeting held on 15th September:-

The minutes of the meeting held on 15th September 2020 were proposed by Cllr. M. Howard, seconded by Cllr. J. Killeen and agreed.

No. 2 Matters Arising:-

Cllr. P. Hayes requested that Leonard update the meeting on the Burial Ground Review and advise what input the Rural SPC will have in relation to same.

L. Cleary addressed the members and advised that the Council had appointed Ollie O’Loughlin, former Director of Service with Limerick City & County Council, to co-ordinate the review and the terms of reference had been forwarded to him. Two Elected Members have been appointed from each Municipal District to represent and input into the review. He advised Mr. O’Loughlin will meet with staff from the Burial Ground Unit, Rural Development, Municipal Districts and Elected Members as well as external reps from Undertakers, BG Committees etc. He has commenced a desktop review in terms of burial ground sites, historical issues, legislative background and resources. The next step will involve engagement with all stakeholders including SPC members after which a draft review will be available for discussion and members will have an opportunity to input into same and raise any further issues/concerns. Mr. O’Loughlin will then revert with a final report.

The timescale involved will be approximately 3 months for the review. However, due to current restrictions public consultations are limited and can only be conducted via Zoom. It is hoped that the review will be concluded before the CSS Scheme comes before the full Council for approval.

No. 3 Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Biodiversity.

L. Cleary addressed the meeting and advised that a number of months ago Prof. John Sweeney presented to the full Council on Climate Change and Clare and Leonard was asked by Anny Wise to make his presentation available to this SPC. Leonard called on Anny to present on same.

A. Wise addressed the members and advised that the presentation was especially designed for Clare and that it covers the major issues that the Local Authority and SPC need to be dealing with e.g. water, ground water flooding, sea level flooding, wind storms, rising temperature, coastal erosion etc.

Anny summarised the presentation as follows:-

- A plaque was put up of the first glacier to lose its status as a glacier. It is expected in the next 200 years that all glaciers will follow the same path.
- According to the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) Working Group, it is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th Century.
- CO₂ is one of the greenhouse gasses. It takes over 100 years before it dissipates from the atmosphere.
- Mountains can cause habitual flooding and there are some in Clare.
- Hurricanes are becoming more prevalent.
- The wettest Winter recorded was in 2015/2016 and serious wind/storms were recorded in 2013/2014.
- Temperatures are rising and Shannon Airport is higher than any other place in Ireland.
- Sea level is rising over 1m and coastal flooding is occurring everywhere. Repairs are being carried out but barriers/embankments cannot be put up everywhere as the water will move somewhere else.
- Research shows links between climate change and extreme weather events (including heatwaves).
- Local authorities are encountering difficulties with climate action.
- The Climate Action Plan did not go through. Words used were considered wooly e.g. "may do", "should do". There was no concrete goals in the plan.
- The OPW are dealing with flooding projects. Local Authorities can get involved particularly where drainage is involved and they are working on a range of flood alleviation projects from small to large scale.
- There will be rural transport issues in relation to losing both diesel/petrol cars. Ireland is not doing too well in the performance index but there has been improvements due to Covid as there is less use of cars.

Prof. Sweeney's presentation showed some examples of flooding on the River Shannon and Parteen Weir and showed the model of rain fall and temperature.

Anny advised that there was government agreement with three political parties that there would be a climate action policy within 100 days. She referred to a court case involving Friends of Earth but was not fit for purpose. All the information was based on a Climate Action Plan which is now invalid and there is no National Plan.

Anny stated that the purpose of today's presentation was to raise awareness and have consultation on the factors. She stated that there is a need to look at the following:-

1. What can the Local Authority do?
2. There is a need to think local. Windfarms planned for Clare are not local. Local renewable energy plans are needed. Apart from petrol/diesel there is a need to get eliminate coal, peat and oil and if renewable energy is used it will produce gas and electricity.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked Anny for a wonderful presentation which gives hope.

Cllr. C. Murphy addressed the members and thanked Anny for her synopsis. Given the count-down to the County Development Plan he enquired as to what the implications are for the County? He stated that wind energy still operates from guidelines published in 2006 and the average height is now 170m with a big difference in technology. A parliamentary question has been forwarded to Deputy Cathal Crowe asking when new guidelines will be published as they will have direct consequence on how the Wind Energy Strategy within our new County Development Plan will be developed. Cillian advised that as much pressure as possible needs to be put on National Government to develop these guidelines as County Development Plans are up for review across the entire country.

Cillian stated that a number of projects are going through planning within the County, up to now wind energy projects have been mostly developed in non-contentious locations, however it would appear future development will now be competing in locations that are closer to local communities. The consequence will be more and more vocal opposition. Lack of guidelines and a clear strategy will tear communities apart and it is important that the guidelines be as clear as possible. Cillian referred to the opportunity that now exists for community owned energy projects. Currently the communities are receiving approx. €2 per MW/h from developers as community benefit whereas in the last round of grid connection auctions community owned projects received an average of €102 per MW/h. This highlights the scale of the missed opportunities for communities to benefit from climate action and renewable energy production.

A. Wise addressed Cillian's comments and advised that the wind turbine policy needs transparency with goals, objectives and time limits. She stated that even though there is no national policy, the SEA have been giving guidance to communities. Last year saw individual turbines being developed and were all community run for use by the community.

Cllr. P. Burke thanked Anny for her presentation. He stated that the last few winters were very mild and wet and this affects indoor livestock. He stated that the Local Authorities need to take action in relation to flood defences in particular in the Killaloe Municipal District. Storm Ellen badly affected the area in August with widespread damage to mature trees with some blown over on to minor/regional roads. Local Authorities take action to prevent lives being lost in relation to tree felling but when local landowners try to carry out works to remove trees from the side of the roads they are met with objections and this is disappointing.

Cllr. J Killeen agreed that new guidelines should be prepared for wind turbines as there is more knowledge out there now than in 2006. Cllr. Killeen recommended that a letter be sent to the Minister to ask him to outline developments so far and to give an indication as to when guidelines will be finalised. He stated that recently there was 70 objections/observations on one planning application and unfortunately these applications for wind turbines are being sought while awaiting planning guidelines. Joe referred to application for funding for flood remediation works and stated that Athlone/Gort/Kinvara had

received funding. He advised that the flooding situation along the River Fergus in Corofin, Boston, Tubber, Carron and New Quay affects road users and farm land. He enquired if an application could be put forward for those areas and other areas affected by repeat flooding.

A. Wise addressed the comments and stated that if a mature oak tree sequences CO2 and if the tree is old then its branches will become very brittle and the branches would need to be cut down. If they are part of the hedgerow they should not be destroyed because of habitat, and protected bats use these areas and they are also pollinators. Hedge/tree cutting cannot take place between 1st March and 31st August but a balanced decision is needed on this.

A. Wise referred to the regulations on windfarms and community renewable energy. She stated that the ESB are now going to pay the local community. Up until a year ago this was not the case therefore energy had been wasted. If a local community had solar panels on e.g. a community centre and had too much energy they could distribute the surplus to the community or to the ESB and receive payment.

Cllr. P. Hayes concurred with the views of the members in relation to wind energy and flooding. He set out his disappointment that the SPC does not get to review the policy and that it should be reviewed as part of the County Development Plan. He stated that Climate Change will continue to be an item on the Agenda and that it is good practice to brief members. He advised that water turbines are not exempt from Planning and they can be used to re-charge electric cars and run a farm. He again thanked Anny for her presentation and asked her to put in suggestions for the next meeting.

No. 4 Review of Rural Development Strategy

L. Cleary addressed the meeting and invited members to submit ideas on how to approach and carry out a review of the Rural Development Strategy. He advised that the Rural Directorate was formed in 2016 and within 12 months, the Strategy was launched, during which time the Rural Development Forum was formed. The Strategy is 3 years old now and recommends a mid-term review. The review will involve the following:-

- Looking at the 8 pillars in the Strategy and identify the projects that have been progressed.
- Has there been improvements on animation with local statutory agencies?
- Has partnerships improved?
- Has there been collaboration and integration around rural development?
- How has Government investment been over the three years?
- Review the National Government Rural Development Plan. Look at metrics and how it has performed.

Leonard invited members to submit their ideas and he advised that the SPC would frame the policy direction with external agencies.

Cllr. P. Hayes recommended that the members review the working document in their own time and how it impacts on communities, what the RCDOs have brought and what a difference they have made. He requested that the members email in their views. As it is about the whole county a number of sectors of the Council should take part in this review e.g. planning.

No. 5 Review of Rural Investment Programme

B. Haugh addressed the members and referred to the overview of all the funding schemes in 2020 which was circulated in advance of the meeting. The first report refers to the list of 2020 funding streams and allocations to date and projects that have been sent to the Department for approval. She stated that €1.8m of funding was allocated to 470 applications. In total 657 projects were received and assessed under the various funding schemes. A summary breakdown of the grant funding allocations by Municipal District was also circulated together with details on other pre-2020 projects which are still in progress. B. Haugh clarified the Rural Development Directorate's role in the oversight and administration of these funding schemes from start to finish in terms of applications, community engagement, interim reporting, drawdowns and audit.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked B. Haugh for the presentation and advised that it showed the value of the Rural Development Department. The report presented showed how much money is being invested in the County. He also took the opportunity to thank all the staff in Rural Development for administering all the grants.

A number of members also thanked the staff and enquired if it was possible to put a calendar together for when these grants are advertised or a monthly update of schemes that are currently available with closing dates.

B. Haugh advised that most of the schemes are rolled out at National level which means it is difficult to prepare a calendar of timelines as such is dependent on the Department's timelines. However, she agreed that the details of all such funding schemes would be made available to the Members in the Monthly Management Report.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked David Bennett who had been a huge asset to Killaloe District and wished him well in his new post in Limerick.

Any other business

Schedule of Meetings 2021

A discussion took place on the circulated schedule of SPC meetings for 2021 and it was noted that the time of 3pm clashes with the LCETB meetings. It was agreed to change the first meeting in February to 10.30am and review it after that.

Burren Ecotourism Network

Cllr. J. Killeen took the opportunity to congratulate the Burren Ecotourism Network on winning a Lonely Planet Award in its "Best in Travel" picks for 2021. He advised that the group work together collaboratively and adopt eco-friendly initiatives to cut the cost of their power and have been very good at promoting the Burren and long stay tourism in an eco-friendly manner. They work positively together to promote tourism and promote a brand and also raise awareness of eco-tourism. Cllr. M. Howard echoed the congratulations and stated that the Burren Ecotourism Network work together, not in competition and they work with B&Bs and restaurants in the area. She advised that most people in the Burren are sole traders and family owned businesses. Mary paid tribute to Carol Gleeson as the Lonely Planet is the bible for bag packers and tourists.

Leonard added to the congratulations and stated that the Community Support Scheme grant has allocated funding towards the Burren community in the sustainable tourism category. If allocations can be sustained in 2021 the Council could support other areas with that type of model.

Cllr. P. Burke complimented Cllr. P. Hayes on chairing the meeting remotely and thanked John Treacy for facilitating the meeting. He also congratulated the Burren Ecotourism Network and wished them well.

With no other business the meeting concluded.

Signed: _____

Cllr. P. Hayes
Cathaoirleach

Leonard Cleary
Director of Rural Development and
West Clare Municipal District