

Minutes of the Rural Development Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) held on Wednesday 23rd February at 10.00 a.m. in the Council Chamber and on-line

In attendance:

Cllr. Pat Hayes
Cllr. Shane Talty
Cllr. Pat Burke
Cllr. Joe Killeen
Cllr. Cillian Murphy
Cllr. Bill Chambers
Cllr. Mary Howard
Mr. Eugene Crimmins
Mr. Denis Tuohy
Ms. Jean Tierney O’Keeffe
Ms. Anny Wise
Mr. Leonard Cleary
Ms. Bernadette Haugh
Ms. Helen Moloney

Organisation:

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

Apologies

Ms. Niamh O’Callaghan Community/Voluntary

No. 1 Minutes of Meeting held on 16th November 2021:

The minutes of the meeting held on 16th November 2021 were proposed by Cllr. P. Burke, seconded by Cllr. J. Killeen and agreed.

No. 2 Minutes of Meeting held on 26th January 2022:-

The minutes of the meeting held on 26th January 2022 were proposed by Cllr. C. Murphy, seconded by Cllr. J. Killeen and agreed.

No. 3 Matters arising:

D. Tuohy enquired if there was any update from government nationally regarding the proposed levy on undeveloped land. Cllr. P. Hayes advised that it was discussed at a recent Council meeting and a number of queries were raised on the subject. He stated that it was quite unfair that the members do not have knowledge of this before making a submission on the County Development Plan. He stated that there is a need for clarity before close of submissions.

Anny addressed the meeting and stated that Biodiversity and Climate Change was omitted from the last two SPC meetings. L. Cleary advised that a special workshop is taking place today to discuss the Rural Development Strategy and stated that the agenda item is not being removed from the Agenda but there is a scheduling issue at the moment. The issue with camper van parking has also been deferred. The item will be included on the next Agenda and will be given priority. Cllr. P. Hayes advised that the last meeting was organised to discuss the County Development Plan and it was very informative. He advised that there is a sector of society that have not engaged in the process. They should look at the issues as there is a lot of contradictions in national policy as well as local policy. It needs to align with local policy and it is important that the public engage in this process.

No. 4 Review of the Rural Development Strategy - Presentation by Dr. Seán O’Riordáin

L. Cleary welcomed Dr. Seán O’Riordáin to the meeting. At a previous meeting, Sean presented the earlier draft. Leonard advised that this is the SPC which has a specific role in partnership with the Rural Development Forum. He stated that it is important that the SPC input heavily into the strategy and there will be interaction between the SPC and the Rural Development Forum. He advised that feedback was taken on board following consultation and Sean will present a refined review of the strategy.

Dr. Seán O’Riordáin thanked the members for the invitation and he stated that it was a pleasure to be engaging with the Committee. He stated that it had been a very positive experience and advised that the review was largely completed. He stated that he will be happy to go back through it if there are any further issues. It was a high level review and looked at different elements of implementation by different members of the forum. The Council not only took on ownership under the actions of the original strategy but have worked with different agencies at local level. It was a very positive exercise and there is a strong platform to build from and will very much improve collaboration. Event engagement under the umbrella of the strategy has resulted in a real focus on development issues. There is always an increased expectation of meeting different needs and actions.

Dr. O’Riordáin presented on the following:

- Overview of the pillars in the Strategy, identification of improvements in local partnership, identification of government investment and examination of key strategic metrics.
- Recommendations of the Review i.e. adoption of a specific waste/wastewater and town/village renewal objective, adoption of a specific strategic action on tourism, delivery of a specific strategic action for agriculture and marine sectors, delivery of a just transition framework with a focus on Moneypoint as an energy hub.
- Renewing Clare’s Rural Potential and the key focus on population growth, providing supports for combined towns and partnering parishes, developing social enterprise centres, increase the quality of the physical, built, social and cultural environment and the capacity to access exchequer resources.
- 8 Strategic Actions underpinned by 30 sub-actions.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked Dr. O’Riordáin for this presentation and invited members’ input.

Cllr. C. Murphy thanked Sean for his presentation. He advised that he would forward notes to Bernie on same. Cillian enquired how critical the launch of the Town Centre First will be from a rural regeneration perspective. The one concern he outlined was that delivery of the Town Centre First will fall to one Director of Service when it should be a cross directorate issue. Climate change is also a cross directorate issue. He advised that rural redevelopment cuts across a lot of directorates e.g. housing and there is a need to consider where it sits within the Local Authority. He referred to the National Planning Framework and the unfortunate timing of the review, as it will not be completed before the adoption of the new County Development Plan. He referred to KPIs and enquired what constitutes Rural Clare as there is a lack of clarity on this and he noted that the middle of Ennis Town is the only area not included. With regard to job creation he advised that it needs to be more specific with KPIs in terms of settlement strategy. He stressed the importance that the Rural Development Directorate align the KPIs with the Town Centre First. In relation to rateable

evaluation there is a need to be careful not to increase it too much and to look at it sectorally as there is a need to take a balanced approach. In relation to public expenditure, Cillian stated that there is also a need to balance this out across the different sectors. Cillian referred to Local Link and noted that they are not part of this and are a critical transport provider.

Cllr. J. Killeen thanked Sean for his presentation and referred to the Community Planning and Consultation. He stated that the CLDC facilitated and financed the Plan. He advised that the Rural and Community Development Officers, on behalf of the Council, will be brought in at the end of the plan. He stated that this was disjointed. He recommended the introduction of a more co-ordinated service to work together and make it more realistic, in relation to long term and short term aims and more realistic time frames. Collaboration between both agencies needs to be worked on. He referred to how effective the RCDOs have been on the ground and how they have got to know their rural communities and there is great collaboration and engagement with them. He stated that there is a meeting scheduled for 1st March for the North Clare area to look at traffic, transport and tourism and it is an area that needs to be prioritised and strengthened. Cllr. Killeen spoke on social enterprise and industry in rural areas and stated that there is an opportunity to develop industry in rural areas where there are entrepreneurs. He advised that the rate of valuation is causing a huge problem for farmers and there is an opportunity to develop enterprise in rural areas. There is also a need to encourage those to come forward with ideas. These people would need support and upskilling and will need to collaborate with the employment sector of Clare, LEO and the RCDOs.

Cllr. Killeen referred to the progression of Digiclaré whereby people can work remotely but proper broadband systems is needed in some areas in order to get the best use out of the hubs. He stated that now is the time to look to the future and maybe state agencies could be directed to deliver in these hubs. Waste water issues are causing concern for Councillors and rural communities as there is no proper system in place. He stated that areas with the greatest need have to be identified and Irish Water need to concentrate on that. This allows a village to increase its population and Cllr. Killeen recommended involving the Oireachtas members.

Cllr. Killeen referred to the National Development Plan and in particular to the number of teachers in schools which is based on pupil numbers e.g. if the population is not sufficient the school will lose their teacher compliment. A critical level of support is required for towns/villages that have the infrastructure for a solid education system. If the population is not allocated to those areas, supports will be undermined.

D. Tuohy addressed the meeting and thanked Sean for the presentation and for allowing them to make a submission. He stated that it is necessary to figure out an area, highlight the positives and highlight where improvements can be made. He stated that it was interesting to read some of the comments on co-operation and greater collaboration and the difficulties getting collaboration across areas, since funding comes from different sectors. He referred to the role of the SPC and going forward whether the role should be expanded and stressed the need to get everyone in the one room fighting for rural Clare.

Denis enquired what is the different areas and different categories in rural Clare. He stated that some villages suffer population decline and there needs to be positive discrimination. These areas need to be focused on and assisted. He stated that the Rural Development Team is very positive. He enquired if there are multiple agencies trying to do the same thing when they could be more holistic and collaborative. He advised that it will be

interesting to see how some sectors will deliver the strategy and there may be a need to look at how positives can come out of it. He stated that delivery across multiple agencies remain a challenge. He referred to the implementation plans and actions and enquired if high speed broadband should be covered. He referred to the ability to access exchequer funding and complimented the Council. He enquired if there is a role for the Council to act and lead as a funding body for communities who want to develop renewables. He stated that they have a dynamic agriculture and marine sector with a lot of knowledge.

Cllr. P. Burke thanked Sean and acknowledged the recent funding allocation for Scariff and advised that it is a major investment. He enquired if this investment would further deplete villages in the area and what other services will be available. He stated that people will commute to more central areas and leave their villages behind. He enquired if a survey or feasibility study could be carried out for the remaining villages. They may have spare rooms to develop mini hubs for people who do not have access to adequate broadband, in order to keep the villages alive. He stated that it was very exciting news for Scariff but stated that surrounding villages could become further depleted.

Cllr. P. Hayes referred to the project in Scariff and advised that more projects like this will need to be looked at. The project will deliver for East Clare and will keep people in the area and contribute to the community. He referred to the loss of services e.g. Post Offices and Banks and that this is one of the challenges faced by communities. He stated that one of the biggest issues is connectivity of communities and transport is an important element regarding issues around climate change. The other issues include childcare. Communities depend very much on having these facilities. A balance of services is needed in communities to keep towns alive and there is a need to bring innovation to this. This is the challenge for the strategy. People will not live in villages without services. While broadband is expected to be rolled out, Cllr. Hayes raised concern about people not using the hubs. He referred to the lack of infrastructure in some villages and there is no way the villages will grow if they do not have basic infrastructure. He referred to the Town Centre First initiative which should form part of the Strategy as it is an important element and it will be cross cutting. He stated that it might end up in Planning but it needs to be part of the whole process and there is a need to be able to buy into that. He stated that transport is key and they fought the battle with Clare Bus. He stated that Clare Bus knew the areas and that TII is a disjointed service. He advised that the Council do not have a transport strategy but now it is important so that connectivity can be made. He recommended that Cillian Griffin be part of this review.

Cllr. C. Murphy stated that the hubs provide vital connectivity at the moment and the long term benefit of the hubs is the social aspect of remote working. He stated that they can become a more social/multi use centre and enquired what other services could go into these hubs which could further add to the social aspect of them.

Sean thanked the members for their input and advised that he has noted down the comments. He stated that they are common sense ideas that need to be applied in the strategy. In relation to the smaller villages he enquired if there was potential for vacant areas to be brought back into use by providing mini hubs. He stated that the expectation has changed in relation to hubs and there is now a social aspect of going in and meeting fellow entrepreneurs and they are critical for people working alone. He stated that there is potential for a pilot scheme and build on the strength of the Council and bring in all departments. He stated that there is a clear line between the Rural Strategy and the Development Plan. He advised that the Development Plan may need to be amended because of the absence of up to date census data. He referred to regeneration policy in

towns and recommended using the policy framework being given by the Town Centre First Programme i.e. renew towns and villages and increase population. This will be detailed in the Rural policy and climate action plan with waste water system pilots to allow capacity and renewal. He enquired if this can be advanced similar to the roll out of digi hubs. There is capacity and opportunities to advance waste water systems but there is a need to focus on what is realistic. He stated that he will take on board all points raised and fully embed them in the document.

Cllr. J. Killeen advised that there is an opportunity in Moneypoint for a substantial economic pay back in employment terms as offshore wind energy generation can be developed and on shore can supplement income for farmers. This could be a significant support for rural areas in 5 years. The infrastructure is in place linking the different counties. He stated that there is no reason why the West cannot supply wind energy as it has high wind speeds and this could be significant for rural Ireland.

Cllr. C. Murphy referred to the Loop Head Strategy and stated that one of the metrics is on minimum internet speeds and quality. He advised that this should be looked at as a metric across rural Clare. He referred to the Shannon Estuary and recommended that a working group be set up to ensure communities are represented at the table and to have community involvement on environmental/community groups regarding the effective use of the Estuary. He enquired if there was any eirgrid roadmap that is doing a Wi-Fi plan.

Cllr. P. Hayes stated that there is an opportunity for walking routes and trails which would mean working with farming communities on the tourism product. He stated that farmers are at the heart and soul of the communities and it is imperative that this is not lost. He requested an update on the Tourism and Digital Strategy.

L. Cleary thanked the SPC members for their engagement and stated that there is a lot of feedback to be digested. He advised that there are solid ideas to take forward and stressed the importance of inter-agency collaboration. He took the opportunity to thank Bernie who has led out in the review with Sean and Maureen. He stated that there is a lot of work going on behind the scenes and thanked all involved for an excellent job. He advised that there will be interaction between the Rural Development Forum, Management Team and the Senior Team.

Sean stated that the Taoiseach made the point that Ireland will be a significant net energy supporter within a decade and this has huge potential off the West Coast and Moneypoint would be ideal.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked Sean for his presentation and stated that Moneypoint has huge potential.

No. 5 Town Centre First Programme

B. Haugh referred to the brief circulated with the Agenda on the Town Centre First Policy and presented an overview as follows:-

- Town Centre First Policy Provisions
- Key Actions
- Role of Town Regeneration Officer
- Case Studies

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked Bernie for the overview of the plan and invited members to comment.

Cllr. J. Killeen welcomed the initiative and referred to dereliction in towns and villages. He stated that in order to draw down funding, projects need to be shovel ready with a view to where development will lead.

Cllr. C. Murphy enquired what constitutes a town. He stated that this is the future and is a pathway. He referred to Carrigaholt and stated that it needs to be strategic as a village but it is not a town and he enquired if there is a line drawn. Bernie stated that she would raise this as similar queries have come up. She advised that it may be based on population figures but will seek clarification.

Mr. D. Tuohy enquired if there was any indication who will be implementing this i.e. will it be the Council or will it be somebody independent. In relation to the name Town Regeneration Officers, Denis stated that facilitators would be a more appropriate name and enquired who nominates/appoints the officers.

Bernie advised that she does not have that level of detail at this stage. She stated that it may be rolled out in the Council structure. She advised that a lot of the document is built around planning policy. She referred to the Town Centre Masterplan Initiative which was launched before Christmas with Sixmilebridge selected in Co. Clare for the 100K planning exercise. She envisages that this will continue and other towns will be selected. She stated that she will engage with the Department and keep the SPC informed.

Cllr. P. Hayes stated that the key element of this is where small villages will sit in or will it be for larger towns. He stated that this is a good opportunity for some towns and villages.

No. 6 Any Other Business

Rights of Nature

A. Wise advised that the Clare PPN are coordinating a presentation on the "Rights of Nature" and requested that this be presented to the next Rural SPC Meeting. She stated that there are a number of Councils that have approved this e.g. Donegal.

D. Tuohy requested that a document be sent prior to the meeting.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked the members for attending and for their contribution.

With no other business the meeting concluded.