

Minutes of the Social Development Strategic Policy Committee held in Áras Contae an Chláir on Tuesday, 7th March 2017 at 2.30pm

Present:

Cllr Gerard Flynn, Chairperson
Cllr Tom McNamara
Cllr Paul Murphy
Cllr Pat Burke
Cllr Ann Norton
Anny Wise
Dermot Hayes
Patrick Keogh
Liam Conneally, Director of Services
Seán Lenihan, A/Senior Executive Officer
Robert Burns, A/Senior Executive Engineer
Helen Walsh, County Librarian
Liam O'Connor, Administrative Officer
Claire Feeney, Senior Executive Officer, Housing Agency
Valerie Fleming, Assistant Staff Officer

Apologies:

Cllr P.J. Kelly
Cllr Tony O'Brien
Liam Williams

On commencement Cllr Flynn proposed an adjournment for a period of 10 minutes as a mark of respect to the late Seán Ward, Senior Engineer, Clare County Council. He said that Seán was a true gentleman and will be sadly missed by all who knew him. He offered his condolences to Seán's family.

Liam Conneally addressed the meeting saying that Seán commenced employment with Clare County Council in 2001 as Senior Engineer in the Environment Department. From 2009 onwards he was Senior Engineer with the Water Services Department. He said that Seán was a trusted and loyal colleague who was quietly spoken and was a gentleman to his fingertips. He added that Seán was the person he approached when he needed information and that he will be greatly missed by the staff of Clare County Council.

Seán Lenihan expressed his sympathy to Seán's family and said that he worked closely with him in Environment, in his role in East Clare and more recently Seán was his immediate boss for the last five years in the Water Services Department.

The meeting then adjourned for 10 minutes.

1. Minutes of meeting held on 2nd November 2016.

The minutes of the previous meeting were proposed by Patrick Keogh, seconded by Cllr Tom McNamara and agreed.

2. Matters Arising.

Dermot Hayes said he submitted an item for the Agenda which had not been included.

Cllr Gerry Flynn responded that the item submitted was not relevant to the policy role of the Social Development SPC.

3. Social Development SPC.

Liam Conneally advised that the Directorate has been broadened to include Housing, Arts, Culture, Sport and Recreation. With regard to membership of the SPC he said nominations are awaited from the Agriculture and Environment Sectors. The Development Sector will be represented by Richard Woods and the Business Sector by Patrick Keogh. Tommy Guilfoyle will move from the Arts and Culture SPC to represent Trade Unions. Geraldine Hetheron will be the Community & Voluntary rep and Dermot Hayes will represent Social Inclusion. Anny Wise is to move to the Rural Development SPC.

Liam Conneally referred to the *Social Development Work Priorities 2017* outline which was circulated at the meeting. He said this is an extensive body of work and that each work item listed requires a whole body of work to be carried out by the Executive.

He stated that housing delivery is a national priority and also a priority of Clare County Council. He said that while demand is still greater than supply the supply is very tangible as Clare County Council acquired 95 units last year and is in the process of building over 70 houses directly with the remainder delivered through Approved Housing Bodies and through leasing.

Liam made reference to the design and planning of the new County Library and confirmed that Helen Walsh, Project Manager, will update the SPC throughout stages of its delivery.

4. (a) Agree dates for 2017 Social Development SPC Meetings.

Cllr Gerry Flynn referred to the proposed schedule of dates for the 2017 Social Development SPC Meetings which circulated with the Agenda.

The schedule was proposed by Cllr Tom McNamara, seconded by Cllr Ann Norton and agreed.

(b) Agree Strategic Policy Committees Standing Orders.

The draft Strategic Policy Committee Standing Orders was circulated with the Agenda and were proposed by Cllr Ann Norton, seconded by Cllr Tom McNamara and agreed.

Cllr G. Flynn then requested that Item No 6 be dealt with next to facilitate Claire Feeney's return to Dublin.

6. National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability.

Claire Feeney, SEO, Housing Agency, provided a PowerPoint presentation outlining details of the *National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability*.

The vision of this Strategy is “To facilitate access, for PWD, to the appropriate range of housing & related support services, delivered in an integrated & sustainable manner, which promotes equality of opportunity, individual choice & independent living.”

Claire Feeney stated that there are 9 strategic aims with 80 action points and the *Rebuilding Ireland* document extended the date for implementation of the strategy to 2020. She said that the establishment of steering groups in each local authority, chaired by the Housing Director of Service, is key to the delivery of this strategy.

Claire outlined the proposed changes of the strategy as follows:

- The details included in the Disability Category of a housing assessment will help target the right supports for each individual with a disability.
- Priority given to medical requirements where a change of housing will improve or stabilise a condition
- Creation of an ‘offer zone’ where people will be notified c. 3 – 6 months in advance of being offered housing. This will give sufficient time to process applications for supports.
- Joint applications – at least one person will have a disability and the other need not be a relative or partner.
- Use of discretion in HAP – currently there is up to 20% discretion on the contribution payable towards rent but the request is to use this 20% as the general rule for people with disabilities. Also, people with disabilities may need slightly bigger dwellings or require particular locations.

The Strategy aims to move away from congregated settings to an ordinary home environment where people with disabilities have a choice about where they live and who they live with.

Claire pointed out that local authorities need to be mindful that this strategy will impact on their allocations policy.

She concluded that it is important to have a multi-agency approach to this strategy to ensure that people with disabilities live in homes of their choice that meet their needs.

Cllr Gerry Flynn thanked Claire for a very informative presentation.

Dermot Hayes also thanked Claire for her presentation and pointed out that he recently attended a meeting in Dublin with regard to disabilities that took 1.5 years to organise and so he is concerned that speed of delivery of this strategy may be an issue. He also stated that there are many residents of nursing homes that should not be there and would prefer to live in a community but that option is currently not available to them.

Cllr Ann Norton said the bigger issue is the need for housing within the whole disability sector and the simplifying of information as to where to go and who to go to. She said this is a great programme but a big issue will be the number of people to come through the system that housing bodies are not yet aware of i.e. people currently being cared for by elderly parents. She said that this programme is valuable for the elderly as it provides peace of mind that their disabled children will be cared for after they are gone. She added that not all disability is physical but that a large number of houses will need to be specially adapted and this will bring a huge cost. She said Claire’s presentation was very good and she would be confident of the success of the Strategy.

Claire Feeney said that people with disabilities have fallen down the priority listing as homelessness has taken priority but that it is time to raise the profile again. She added that people with disabilities are now living longer with some being cared for by elderly parents who are concerned as to what will become of their loved ones when they are no longer around. She said that it is important to identify need and have awareness about those being totally cared for in the family home but who could present as an emergency case requiring accommodation at any time. There is currently no facility to cater for this situation right now.

Cllr Gerry Flynn added that he considers the HSE are now engaging more positively and thanked Claire again for her presentation.

5. *Creative Ireland* Presentation.

Helen Walsh provided an overview of Clare Library, Arts, Museum and Archives Service. She said that the brief includes most of the cultural services except for Heritage. She outlined that there are 8 full-time branch libraries, 6 part-time and a Local Studies Centre. She said the Arts service, established in 1975, is one of the oldest in the Country. She added that there is a 108 seat theatre in Kilkee, artists' studios in Tulla and an art gallery in Ennistymon. The County Museum employs 3 staff and County Archives employ 2 staff.

Helen Walsh then updated the meeting about *Creative Ireland* – the legacy programme from the 1916-2016 programme which was deemed a huge success. *Creative Ireland* places creativity at the centre of public policy and aims to expose every child in Ireland to the arts from an early age. She said it is a culture based programme designed to promote individual, community and national wellbeing. There are 10 deliverables scheduled for 2017 and every county must devise a comprehensive strategy by October 2017. A Culture Team led by the Director of Service, Liam Conneally, has been established and Helen is the *Creative Ireland* co-ordinator for Clare. Helen is organising a public workshop around *Creative Ireland* on 30th March to inform, enthuse and initiate the programme and she will report back to the SPC at the next meeting. She added that the previous SPC formed a subcommittee for the 1916-2016 programme and this is an option for this SPC regarding *Creative Ireland*.

Cllr Gerry Flynn thanked Helen for her updates and added if there was an appetite for a subcommittee that he saw no reason why one should not be created.

7. Delivering Housing Units:

- **Construction Programme**
- **RAS/HAP**
- **Leasing**
- **Acquisitions**

Liam Conneally advised the Council have purchased 95 properties in the last twelve months. There are currently 1056 HAP tenancies, 428 RAS tenancies and 274 leases (110 short term, 87 long term and 77 voluntary). He stated that the Council have approval to construct 10 units in Feakle, 6 in

Clonlara with an application in place to increase this number and 10 in Quilty also with an application to increase this number to 18. In Shannon's Tullyglass scheme 21 units are proposed.

Liam stated that it takes in the order of 24 months for a development to go from inception to the delivery of the building and he anticipates the Council will not be breaking ground on the above projects until 2018.

Dermot Hayes said it is always good to see development but added there is a housing crisis in the county and called on this SPC to declare a housing crisis in Clare. He said there are currently 2,500 on the housing waiting list and 40 people under the age of 30 living in Clare without sanitation. He stated that if a housing crisis was declared in Clare then the Government would have to provide more funding to that effect.

Cllr Gerry Flynn responded that the remit of the SPC is quite specific - its role is the formation and development of policy and that Dermot's request is outside this remit. He said that it is widely known that there is a national housing crisis but that we are now in the phase of putting forward initiatives and solutions to the crisis.

Cllr Tom McNamara added that there is a housing crisis but he can't see the benefit of declaring that through this forum. He said it is important to lay out a long term housing policy strategy, to look at the potential housing list and see how to address that and then put our requirements to the Government's Housing Department.

Liam Conneally concurred with Cllr McNamara and added that the national housing crisis is a manifestation of a dysfunctional private housing market over the past 8 years and a scaling down of the public sector house building programme. For many years local authorities had not been building social housing as the private sector had satisfied the demand. He said the solution to the housing crisis cannot come from the public sector alone and added that *Rebuilding Ireland* was focussed on addressing the issues that Dermot had raised i.e. house building, acquisition, leasing and housing the homeless.

Anny Wise asked how many people on the housing list are homeless or in temporary accommodation and said that planning permission needs to be more specific in classifying houses as rental or social houses.

Robert Burns stated that the Government have introduced a new initiative called the *Repair and Leasing Scheme* which focuses on private dwellings that are in need of repair. If the owner is not in a position to cover the cost of repairing the dwelling then the local authority can fund the work in return for the property being made available for social housing through a lease for a period of at least 10 years. The maximum that can be spent on any property is €40k and it must be located in an area where there is a high social housing demand. He said it is anticipated that there would be 800 houses at a cost of €32m nationally provided through this scheme this year. He stated that Clare County Council have identified vacant properties and may approach owners with regard to this scheme.

Robert also referred to the *Buy and Renew Initiative* which is aimed at local authorities identifying derelict properties, purchasing the property and renovating to provide social housing. He said both

schemes are valuable schemes as they provide more social housing units and also deal with the problem of vacant and derelict buildings.

Cllr Gerry Flynn said that a lot of people who own vacant houses are in financial difficulty and even if they avail of this scheme they will still have a large debt to pay off.

Liam Conneally responded that the Housing Agency and the Council engage directly with home owners in financial difficulty through the *Mortgage to Lease Scheme*. Under this scheme the state takes on the mortgage and leases the property back to the occupier. Nationally there are 635 properties progressed through this scheme with 217 of these completed.

In response to Anny Wise's question regarding homeless figures Liam said that at the end of February there were 30 adults homeless in Clare. 13 of these were accommodated in Laurel Lodge and 17 in emergency accommodation. There were 13 children homeless at that date. He advised that the Homeless Action Team office is currently being established at Mill Road in Ennis to deal with the issue of homelessness on a one-stop shop basis and this office should be operational by the summer.

Cllr Gerry Flynn stated that he has dealt with families who availed of the *Mortgage to Rent Scheme* and that the balance of debt is still hanging over these families. It would be preferable he said to place them in the rental situation without the debt mounting.

Cllr Tom McNamara called for the old system of the Council providing loans to people who cannot secure funding from other financial institutions to be reinstated. This, he said, will enable people to take ownership of their property.

Seán Lenihan clarified that housing loans are still available from the Council to those who have been refused finance from at least two other financial institutions and subject to certain criteria.

Dermot Hayes asked how much of the €32m budget for the *Repair and Leasing Scheme* is reserved for County Clare.

Robert Burns responded that there was only a national figure provided but that it will most likely be based on demand and that Clare County Council may be able to dictate how much they receive by the amount of work we complete.

In relation to 40 people under the age of 30 living in Clare without sanitation Liam Conneally clarified that the Council are under pressure to provide services to authorised sites only and the difficulty arises when the sites are unauthorised. He said this was an issue for the Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee.

8. New House Renovation/Improvement Scheme.

Robert Burns stated that this item was the *Repair and Leasing Scheme* which had been covered under Agenda Item 7. He added that the standards for these properties will be the new rental standards which are due to be implemented in July this year. He said there are no major changes to these standards and they apply to both the private and the social rental sector.

Cllr Gerry Flynn mentioned the *Planned Maintenance Programme* and said this was a valuable new initiative to ensure council stock is at a much higher level.

9. (a) Rent Review.

Liam O'Connor advised that a rent review will commence this month for all council tenants. A rent review has not been completed since 2011 as the Council were awaiting instructions on a national rent review as suggested by the Department. He stated that 3,000 tenants will be reviewed including those under RAS and Leasing schemes. Tenants will be given 3 weeks in which to respond and revised rent will be implemented from 01st July 2017. He also advised that the Local Government Auditor had requested a rent review to be carried out last year. He said it is a large body of work but will provide the opportunity to update data regarding our tenants.

Gerry Flynn queried if the rent will be similar to the 17% net currently being applied.

Liam O'Connor replied that it would.

(b) Allocations Scheme.

Liam O'Connor said the Department had issued a Circular for local authorities to amend their *Allocations Scheme* to allow for Choice Based Lettings. Under Choice Based Lettings those on the housing list will be given an opportunity to bid for vacancies as they arise. He stated the Clare County Council do not intend to introduce Choice Based Lettings as it is more suited to urban areas with 'difficult to let' locations but nonetheless must provide for it in their Scheme.

He said that he hopes to bring a revised *Allocations Scheme* to the SPC in April and present it to the full Council at the May meeting.

Cllr Gerry Flynn advised that the next SPC meeting is scheduled for June but that a special SPC meeting could be convened if required.

Cllr Gerry Flynn then asked Liam O'Connor to provide an update as item 9(c) regarding the *Incremental Tenant Purchase Scheme*.

(c) Incremental Tenant Purchase Scheme.

Liam O'Connor said that the Council wrote to tenants in March 2016 advising them of this scheme. The scheme requires an income of at least €15k for the household, half of which must come from employment and the tenants must be in receipt of social housing support for at least one year. He said the property is valued and then discounts are applied according to income.

For income up to €20k a discount of 60% is applied, from €20k to €30k a 50% discount is applied and for income over €30k a discount of 40% is applied. Should the tenant seek to dispose of the property there is an incremental charge of 2% per year. He said that information regarding this scheme is on Clare County Council's website and Pdraig MacCormaic is the administrator. He added that so far there have been 5 completed sales and 35 applications received. 22 of these are progressing and 8 did not proceed.

Dermot Hayes asked how a tenant may appeal a decision regarding their rent review.

Liam O'Connor replied that the *Differential Rent Scheme* exists to treat all tenants equally but that there is a Hardship Clause built into it to allow for extreme cases.

Liam Conneally concluded by saying there are four Social Development SPC meetings in the year and each meeting will have an extensive agenda in the area of policy development and advised that participation is crucial to the success of the SPC. He said the *Allocations Scheme* is a reserved function and will have to pass through the SPC forum and that a special meeting will most likely be called in April to deal with the revised scheme.

CLlr Gerry Flynn thanked everybody for attending the meeting and wished Anny Wise well in her new role on the Rural Development SPC.

The meeting then concluded.