

Minutes of the special meeting of the Municipal District of Shannon held on Monday, 26th January 2016 at 9:45am at the offices of Clare County Council, Shannon, Co Clare

Present: Councillors PJ Ryan (Cathaoirleach), Pat McMahon, PJ Ryan, Gerard Flynn, Mike McKee

Apologies Councillor Cathal Crowe

Present: Mr Niall Barrett, Area Co Ordinator, Ger Dollard, Director of Service, Leonard Cleary, Senior Executive Officer, Fiona Mooney, Meetings Administrator.

Update on the implementation of the National Social Housing Strategy in Clare

A briefing document was circulated. The housing director of services outlined that the purpose of the special meeting was to enable discussion at municipal district level about housing services and about the outputs as contained in the briefing document.

Members were advised that fifteen to twenty Syrian and/or Iraqi families would be relocated to Clare from the national refugee resettlement programme. Preparations were underway and April or May were the expected months of arrival. The families would be relocated to the Shannon, Newmarket and Sixmilebridge areas. An interagency group had been set up locally to coordinate service inputs. Ireland had agreed to taking 4,000 families as part of the international programme, therefore it was advised that the number of families for relocation to Clare may increase. The costs to the Council and other integration implications of the arriving refugee families was queried by members. It was clarified by the director that allocations from central government to the Council would reflect the cost of housing provision and some supplementary resources would also be allocated from government for integration initiatives.

The transition from direct provision of local authority housing was a focus of the meeting with the housing executives highlighting the leasing model as the main focus of national policy whereby registered landlords with suitable properties had the opportunity to be matched to social housing applicants. In the case of long term leased properties, the tenure was anything from 10 to 20 years. Efforts were being made to get suitable unoccupied properties into leasing and any landlords were encouraged to make contact with the Council. Members were advised in response to queries that there was a problem with supply of houses in Shannon and that a shortage of suitable properties and reluctance on the part of landlords presented challenges in Shannon. Members were critical of the lack of a construction programme for the past number of years and felt that this had contributed to growing applicant lists. The director confirmed the Council would continue with the scaled down construction programme, as approved by the Department, with 21 houses to be built in the municipal district in the current programme.

The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) was discussed, as was the poor standard of some rental accommodation on the market. It was confirmed that the recent allocation of technical resources to the housing department enabled quicker inspection times and the target was for an inspection of standards as soon after the HAP letting as possible. The director reported that the *maximum* lead in time for an inspection was 8 months into a tenancy. Issues about the standards within

accommodation would be worked through with the landlord by the Council. There were already 250 HAP tenants whereby the Council pays the landlord directly; making a change from the previous system whereby rent supplement was paid by the Department of Social Protection directly to the housing applicant, rather than to the landlord. Applicants in the HAP scheme are taken off the housing list, as they are deemed to be accommodated.

The suspension of standing orders to facilitate the conclusion of the meeting was proposed by Cllr Flynn, seconded by Cllr John Crowe, and agreed.

Members also questioned whether NAMA could be a source of additional social housing supply. The director confirmed the Council was not dealing with NAMA on any properties in the municipal district of Shannon, but it would if there was opportunity.

Where acquisitions of property was concerned, the senior executive officer reported that the county target for 2015 and 2016 is 100 properties. 60 house acquisitions had closed in 2015, with 5 more about to close.

The mortgage to rent scheme which applied to some homeowners in mortgage difficulty was referred to. This scheme also had involvement from Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), the financial institution which had provided the mortgage and the Housing Agency. Some members were critical of the role of some AHBs and of the scheme itself, which they said left former homeowners still with residual debt and a negative credit rating. Some members said that debt forgiveness was a better alternative than the mortgage to rent scheme.

In response to members' complaint that it took too long for casual vacancies to be relet, it was confirmed that because of all the stages (inspection, schedule of works, tendering, mobilising contractor) involved in getting a property fit to let, there was typically a 5 to 6 month lead in time from becoming vacant. It was also acknowledged and agreed that long-term tenants can legitimately feel that newly appointed tenants acquire higher standard houses than the house that has been in a tenancy of long duration.

Derelict houses were discussed and the need for the Council to afford due process and comply fully with the Act was referred to.

The number of applications on the housing list for the district (630) was confirmed and it was reported that a formal assessment of housing needs would be done in 2016. Members asked that a variety of means of trying to contact applicants be utilised.

The recent flooding in the county was discussed and it was confirmed that while the Council had no role where private homeowners' homes flood, the Council had in fact played a role in the response to the crisis on humanitarian grounds, with government financial support.

Facilitating communication with officials in the housing department was referred to, the variety of roles staff were performing and the impact of changes in personnel. It was agreed that the new approach of service delivery plans and schedules of municipal district works, among other changes in local government, added to the challenges for both members and staff. It was agreed that members would be circulated with the up to date staff contact list so that members could contact the right designated staff member depending on the service area.