

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE NA GAILLIMHE

Minutes of Housing SPC Meeting held on Wednesday, 01st March 2024 in the Council Chamber, Galway County Council at 2.00 p.m.

I Láthair:-

Baill: Cllr. Jimmy McClearn (Acting Chairperson)
Cllr. James Charity
Cllr. Thomas Welby
Cllr. Eileen Mannion
Cllr. Seamus Walsh

Oifigh: Mr. Michael Owens, Director of Services
Mr. Gerard Scully, Senior Executive Officer
Ms. Carmel Kilcoyne, Senior Executive Officer
Mr. Damien Mitchell, Senior Engineer
Ms. Nuala Heffernan, Administrative Officer
Ms. Angela Spelman Administrative Officer
Mr. Kieran Keon, Senior Social Worker
Ms. Michelle Connellan, Vacant Homes Officer, (VHO)
Ms. Kathleen Lohan, Staff Officer, Housing
Mr. Brendan Kelly, Assistant Staff Officer, Housing

Leithscéal Cllr. Joe Byrne, Chairperson
Mr. Kenny Deery
Ms. Marcella Conneely
Mr. Mark Coffey
Mr. Martin Ward

In the absence of the Chairperson, Cllr. Byrne, it was agreed that Cllr. McClearn would chair the meeting. This was proposed by Cllr Tom Welby and seconded by Cllr Eileen Mannion.

The Chair on his own behalf and on behalf of the Committee conveyed his sympathies to the extended Hynes family on the sad passing of former councillor Pat Hynes.

1. Minutes of the meeting of 6th September 2023

The minutes of the SPC meeting held on 15th November 2023 were proposed by Cllr. Welby, seconded by Cllr. Mannion and agreed.

- **Matters of Accuracy** – None

- **Matters Arising – Carna Wastewater Treatment Query**

Mr. Owens in response to Cllr. Mannion outlined that a report on all council estates that are serviced by an existing wastewater treatment plant will go before the next management team meeting on the 5th of March 2024.

2. SPC Work Programme – January to May 2024

Mr. Owens confirmed that the SPC Work Programme for the first half of 2024 was agreed in conjunction with the Chairperson and it has been circulated with the current members. He confirmed that there will be one more Housing SPC to be held Prior to June 2024. The proposed SPC Work Programme was put before the members and unanimously agreed.

3. Vacant Homes Action Plan Update

Ms. Carmel Kilcoyne (SEO) informed the members that the Vacant Homes Action Plan will be updated in 2024. She outlined that the Vacant Homes Survey has been completed and the findings of this survey will be used to update Galway County Council’s Vacant Homes Action Plan. Ms. Kilcoyne explained the reasons behind the need for the update as follows:

- Housing for All – Pathway 4 which has an increased focus on vacancy and dereliction
- New Vacant Homes Action Plan 2024 - 2029
 - Key Policies Addressing Vacancy
 - Actions to Address Vacancy

Ms. Breda Byrne (SO) gave a detailed update to the members on the Vacant Homes Geo-Directory Vacancy Data Survey. The survey was carried out in late 2023 and was completed in February 2024. In particular, she highlighted the following:

- The purpose of Survey – To Determine Vacancy
- A demonstration of the APP – ArcGIS Dashboard View of Surveyed Areas of County Galway.
- Survey Results – 1,708 Properties were Surveyed in 43 settlements and of these 817 were deemed Vacant (773) / Derelict (44).
- The survey identified 4 main Categories of Condition
 - Good – Habitable with minor works required.
 - Fair - Habitable with moderate works required.
 - Poor - Habitable with substantial works required.
 - Uninhabitable – deemed to be derelict/vacant due to the absence of windows, doors, and roof.
- Summary of the Survey Data
 - Table 1: contained the total number of properties surveyed.
 - Table 2: Properties Vacant by Municipal District
 - Table 3: Properties Not vacant by MD.
 - Table 4: Vacant by Condition and MD.

- Photographs of nine derelict or vacant Properties of various condition, ranging from good to uninhabitable were shown to the members as case studies of the types of properties that were encountered during the survey.
- She advised of the feedback that had been received from the property owners following the survey:
- Geo-Directory Vacancy Data Survey – Next Steps
 - An exercise will be carried out to determine who is the registered Owner of the outstanding 728 properties.
 - Property Owners will be contacted and advised of the options available to them - Croí Cónaithe grant, Long Term leasing etc.
 - Options available to Galway County Council will also be considered.
 - CPO Activation Programme – There was a target of 27 in 2023.
- CPO Activation Programme –
 - Identify Vacant Property / Owner of Property
 - Engage with Property Owner
 - Owner brings Property back in to use.
 - If not, Property assessed for Compulsory Acquisition
 - Minor repairs and identify future uses.
- Ms. Byrne concluded her presentation by thanking and acknowledging the support and encouragement that she received from her team members, Community Wardens, and the various local community groups that she encountered while carrying out the survey.

The Chair, Cllr. McClearn thanked Ms. Byrne for her excellent presentation and opened the floor up to the members to ask questions and comments.

In response to queries raised by members, Mr. Owens advised as follows:

In response to Cllr. McClearn, Mr. Owens acknowledged the level of work that has been undertaken and completed by Ms. Byrne and her wider team members (Michelle Connellan, Eoin Hardiman and Lucy Meaney), whereby 1700+ properties were visited across a wide geographical spread of County Galway. He outlined how the raw data compiled from the survey will be harnessed to inform the development of the Vacant Homes Action Plan in 2024. Mr Owens outlined that the first step will be to engage with the owners of the vacant properties and to ascertain what their plans are for the vacant/derelict property. As part of this, Galway County Council will also help by informing the owners of the various grants and funding schemes that are available to help bring back houses into use. He stated that where this is not the case, the intention will be to progress the property into the CPO Activation Programme. He outlined that the Housing Department will shortly notify Galway County Council of our CPO Activation Programme target for 2024. He outlined that Galway County Council will also be using the CPO programme to acquire properties in areas that have been identified with a housing need. Mr. Owens confirmed that the CPO process can be used on properties that are in probate or have issues with their title documents. He also confirmed that Housing have sought additional staffing resources from HR and the Department of Housing for a Civil Technical 1 and Staff Officer for the CPO Activation Programme. Mr. Owens also confirmed that Housing will be requesting additional funding for the Vacant Homes Office, as there is a need for additional funding and resources to tackle the vacancy issue

within the county. He stated that the Department's Vacant Homes Unit will be in Galway on the 4th of March 2024 to discuss Galway County Council's efforts to address vacancy within the county and requests for any additional resources will be discussed.

In response to a query from Cllr. McClearn, in relation to vacancy in existing Council housing stock, Mr. Owens recognised that there is a need to transition with a planned maintenance model, albeit there are significant increased costs, and he pointed to the recent stock survey that has identified the issues. He outlined that housing have submitted staffing requests to the Department through HR for additional staffing resources and it has been raised at CCMA level and a business case relating to funding will be sent to the Housing Department and Minister.

4. Traveller Accommodation Programme 2024 - 2029

Ms. Nuala Heffernan (AO) gave a detailed update to the Elected Members on the process to compile the Traveller Accommodation Programme 2024-2029. In particular, she highlighted the following areas:

- An Independent Person namely Prof. McKenna from NUIG has been appointed to carry out the assessment of needs which will inform the programme.
- Section 10 Housing (Traveller Accommodation Act) 1998 applies
- Dates and summary of Implementation of Traveller Accommodation Programme -
 - Dates December 2023/January 2024 – Notice to Stakeholders before making assessment of need –
 - January/February 2024 – Conduct Assessment of Need
 - April 2024 – Analysis of Assessment of Needs
 - May/June 2024 – Draft TAP
 - 01st July 2024 – Publication of notice that draft programme available for inspection.
 - 30th August 2024 – Latest date for receipt of written submissions.
 - 01st October – Submission of draft to Council members for adoption (3 months before 31st December 2024).
 - 31st December 2024 – Latest date for adoption of programme.
 - 21st January 2025 - Latest date for adjournment of Council meetings
 - 21st February 2025 - If Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025 – 2029 is not adopted by elected members a further 1 month is allowed before the programme, as may be modified, is adopted by Chief Executive Order.
 - Following adoption, TAP 2025 – 2029 is published and submitted to the Minister.
- Equality and Human Rights.
 - Eliminate discrimination.
 - Promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and persons to whom it provides services.

- Protect the human rights of its members, staff and persons to whom it provides services.
- Policy Statement
 - A Statement of Policy in relation to meeting accommodation needs of Travellers must be included in the programme.
- Strategy Statement
 - A strategy for ensuring the implementation of the Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025 – 2029 must be specified in the programme.
- Measures for Implementation
 - TAP must include specific measures or proposals for the implementation of the programme.
 - TAP 2025-2029 should also take account of Traveller families who wish to provide their own accommodation with or without the assistance of the Local Authority.
- Any Submission or comment regarding the preparation of the TAP Programme 2025-2029 can be emailed to travelleraccomdationunit@galwaycoco.ie.

In response to queries raised by members Ms. Heffernan advised as follows:

Ms. Heffernan confirmed to the members that the ethnic identifier question was added to the SSHA's form in 2023. She confirmed that this question was optional, and that some participants of the survey have chosen not to answer the ethnic identifier question. She confirmed that participants of the 2024 form must answer the ethnic identifier question and it cannot be bypassed on the digital form. Ms. Heffernan confirmed that the number of persons with an ethnic identifier on the system are quiet low, and she outlined how Galway County Council have been in contact with Traveller Representative Groups to improve this. She confirmed to Cllr, Welby that some participants are reluctant to answer the ethnic identifier question, and as such failure to answer the question does have an impact on each assessment and the overall results. It is envisaged that over 1,800 assessments will be carried out in 2024, and she confirmed that Galway County Council would be advising persons if they identify as Travellers to complete the ethnic identifier question.

In response to Cllr. Charity, Ms. Heffernan outlined that persons called to partake in the assessment of needs by Prof. McKenna will include Galway City Housing Clients that have included the County as one of their areas of choice, and she believes that this will include occupants of the temporary halting site at Carrowbrowne. Mr. Owens added that he had received correspondence from Galway City Council requesting that Galway County Council take into consideration the preference of those participants resident at Carrowbrowne.

The acting chair thanked Ms. Heffernan for her presentation, and he acknowledged the huge difficulties that Travellers face when trying to source private accommodation, whereby they face discrimination once they give their name to the landlord or their agent.

5 Affordable Housing Delivery Action Plan Update.

Mr. Damien Mitchell updated the meeting on the Affordable Housing Delivery Action Plan Update. In particular, he highlighted the following:

- AFF Housing Schemes
 - Shared Equity Scheme – Local Authorities delivery
 - Cost Rental – AHB Delivery
- Cost of Delivery verses Open Market Value
- Shared Equity Scheme examples
 - The Affordability Gain must be greater than 15%
- Key Challenges
 - Affordability gain and densities for Galway Metropolitan Area
 - Galway County outside the Metropolitan area
- Shared Equity Scheme Challenges
 - Scheme Density – Funding Limit €50,000, €75,000 and €100,000 versus densities permitted in the Development Plan
- Cost Rental Criteria
 - Rents for the development are to be 25% under the current market rent within the area of the development.
 - Scheme is only applicable to Cities and Towns where the population equivalent is greater than 10,000.

In response to queries and comments from the members the following responses were given by Mr. Owens and Mr. Mitchell.

Mr. Owens confirmed that Mr. Welby's motion was brought before the Galway Social Housing Taskforce and the Department had advised of flexibility due to the county not having a population center with a population greater than 10,000 and that they would consider proposals on the basis of the population of the MASP or MD as relevant. Mr. Owens informed the members that a briefing on Affordable Housing was presented at the most recent Housing Summit that took place on the 29th of Feb 2024, whereby a commitment was given to work closely with LA's to address the issues associated with the schemes density based funding limit. He noted that even if the density cap was increased to include a Municipal District's larger population, the €75,000-funding cap may not be viable. He confirmed that Galway County Council will be raising this issue with the Department of Housing and its Minister when they meet again at next week's housing summit. He noted that the current Affordable Housing Scheme is more akin to the previous Shared Ownership Scheme than it is to the much earlier Affordable Housing Schemes. Mr. Owens stated that he intends to undertake a survey to identify the need for affordable housing in the County, with a view to identifying the affordability from the purchaser's perspective.

Replying to Cllr. Welby, Mr. Mitchell stated that the issue with the scheme was the combined problems surrounding the current cost to build, cost of finance and percentage profit leads to high of a selling price.

6 Housing Delivery Action Plan Update

Mr. Damien Mitchell updated the meeting on the Housing Delivery Action Plan Update. In particular, he highlighted the following:

- He stated that the Housing delivery target for 2023 was 351 and that he had originally expected to deliver approximately 300 units. As explained previously to the members, the shortfall for 2023 was due to the issues with the Peter McVerry Trust and the decision to not include some Turnkey (Kilgarve) and LA builds (Weir Road) in the return. He stated that these units were at an advanced stage of construction, and he expected that they will be delivered in 2024. Thus, 226 units were delivered in 2023.
- He stated that the Housing Delivery target for 2024 is 358. He stated units are currently under development and are at an advanced stage. While other units are still at proposal stage with AHB's and Turnkey developers and these will influence the final figure for 2024. He stated that if a contract is not signed for a development, then these units cannot be counted.
- He stated that there will be a significant increase in the number of LA build units in 2025/2026, as there are over 400 plus units under discussion.

In response to queries raised by members, Mr. Mitchell advised the following:

- He confirmed to the chair that Galway County Council's 2023 delivery of units accounted to 64% of the target figure.
- He confirmed that for 2024 there were a significant number of units at proposal stage, and these cannot be included in the proposed numbers until a contract is signed.
- **Nan Burkes Update** – Mr. Mitchell confirmed that Tuath was the preferred AHB chosen and Galway County Council will be engaging with Tuath with a view to commencing the design phase of the development.

7 Update on Tenant Purchase Scheme – 29th January 2-24.

Ms. Nuala Heffernan updated the members on the following changes to the Tenant Purchase Scheme that came into effect on the 29th of January, 2024.

- Income limit - Revised downward to €11,000 per annum.
- Primary Income –
 1. State Pension (Contributory & Non-Contributory)
 2. Widow's, Widower's, Surviving Civil Partner's Pension (Contributory & Non-Contributory).
 3. Blind Pension
 4. Invalidity Pension
 5. Disability Allowance

- Secondary Income – The following payments have been removed from the income disregard list and will now be considered as a secondary source of income.
 1. Working Family Payment
 2. Age 80 (Pension) Increase
 3. Rural Social Scheme
- Time in receipt of Social Housing Supports
The requirement for joint tenants to have been in receipt of social housing support for 10 years each, is amended to one tenant only fulfilling the 10-year requirement.
- Ms. Heffernan stated that there has been an increase in enquiries relating to the TP Scheme since these changes were introduced.
- Ms. Heffernan confirmed to Cllr. Welby that a person in receipt of an Invalidity Pension can now be under 66.

8 Any Other Business

- **Scheme of Allocation** – Cllr. Welby enquired if existing tenants can be considered for downsizings from a 3 bed to a 2 bed LA properties.
- In response, Mr. Owens outlined that there are resource implications in terms of staff and finance that need to be considered for the management of the downsizing requests and it also creates two additional voids in the void's maintenance program. He outlined that the Department was carrying out nationwide exercise with Shared Data in relation to downsizing and any changes to the scheme will need to come with additional resources for Galway County Council to deliver it.
- **Galway Housing Task Force Update** – Mr. Owens informed the members that the current Chair of the Task Force has retired and Mr. John McCarthy will be appointed to the position by the Minister.
- **Student Rent a Room Scheme** – Mr. Owens confirmed that this new Scheme is in place since the beginning of the year and that the Department of Housing intends to carry out a National Campaign to highlight the scheme. He noted that the application form is currently on Galway County Council's Website and that he anticipated an increase in applications when the new academic year begins later in the year. He explained that this additional household income is tax free, however, it is included in the calculation for the LA Clients differential rent, and it may also have implications for other benefits that they are in receipt of.
- The next Housing SPC meeting will take place at 10 am on the 10th of April 2024.
- The meeting then concluded.