

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE NA GAILLIMHE

Minutes of Housing, Culture and Recreation SPC Meeting held at the Menlo Park Hotel on 1st April, 2015 at 11.00a.m.

I Láthair :-

Baill: Cllr. T. McHugh, Chairperson
Cllr. M. Noone
Cllr. D. Burke
Cllr. E. Mannion
Cllr. M. Fahy
Cllr. P. Hynes
Cllr. D. Killilea
Mr. D. McKeon
Ms. Helena McElmeel

Oifigigh: Mr. P. Gavican, D.O.S.
Ms. J. Brann, S.E.O. Housing
Mr. Michael Owens, S.E.O. Corporate Services
Mr. M. O'Donnell, A.O. Housing
Mr. T. Doherty, E.E., Housing
Ms. S. Slattery, A.S.O.

Apologies were received from Ms. M. Jordan A.O. Housing and Mr. M. Sheil, S.E.E. Housing

Cllr. McHugh welcomed all the members to the meeting.

Cllr. Fahy expressed a vote of sympathy to Cllr. Hynes on the loss of his nephew Adrian Hynes. This was seconded by Cllr. McHugh.

1. Commemorative Strategy for the County of Galway –Decade of Commemorations 2013-2023

Mr. Owens circulated a copy of the Strategy to the members, and gave a brief overview of same. This Strategy was prepared by the former Corporate & Cultural Strategic Policy Committee, and adopted by the previous Council. Public consultation took place during 2013 inviting members of the public to submit proposals for cultural, historical and educational events for consideration by the Council in formulating the Strategy. The Council have four flagship projects, i.e. Connemara Cultural Centre at Pearse's Cottage; Irish Language; Decade of Commemoration Memory Mapping Project and Decade of Commemoration Publication.

Cllr. Killilea stated that there were a number of buildings in Tuam which were vacant, and which could be made available for the Commemorations, e.g. Tuam Town Hall. Mr. McKeon said that the new Library in Ballinasloe would also be a suitable venue. Mr. Owens confirmed that any exhibits/lectures would have a County wide focus and would where possible avail of such facilities.

2. Galway Commemorative Programme – Ireland 2016

Mr. Owens informed the meeting that the National Commemorative Programme had been officially launched by the Government on 31st March, 2015. He stated that preparatory work had commenced on the Council's Programme in 2013. The Steering Committee has been established, and the first draft of the County 2016 Programme has been agreed. The Programme includes the production of a fully bi-lingual publication which will be launched during a three day Conference; the launch of a website which will allow contributions from communities, and the development of a Galway County 1916 Heritage Trail.

Public Consultation on the Draft Programme will be held in April-May. It is hoped to maximise community participation by providing support, advice and funding for appropriate community events. Galway County Council has received a grant of €30,000 from the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and a sum of €25,000 has been provided from the Council's own resources. Information sessions will be held to advise on making applications for this funding. The successful applications will be brought before the full Council for approval.

Cllr. McHugh thanked Mr. Owens for his appraisal of the Programme. He said that it would be a huge attraction to all Galway people, at home and abroad. Mr. McKeon said that the launch of the website would be an excellent way for the diaspora to keep in touch with home. Cllr. Mannion said that community engagement was very important, and she supported the development of the Connemara Cultural Centre at Pearse's Cottage.

Cllr. Fahy stated that in 1916 troops marched from Moyode to Limepark in Ardrahan, led by Liam Mellows. He suggested that a commemorative march be held during the centenary. Cllr. Fahy said that the Loughnane and Quinn Memorial Hall in Labane had been named after Mrs. Quinn and the Loughnane brothers who died in 1916. Traditionally there was a Mass held in Labane Church on St. Patrick's Day to commemorate those who fought and died in 1916. Cllr. Fahy requested that the Committee seek permission to hold this Mass on St. Patrick's Day 2016.

Cllr. Hynes informed the meeting that he had been a member on the former Corporate Services SPC, and he wished to thank Mr. Owens for the accuracy of the research carried out.

Cllr. Burke queried what timeframe would be given to the Community Groups, following the public consultation in May. Mr. Owens replied that it was envisaged that the various options would be brought before the July meeting of the Council, so the Groups would have a period of 4-5 weeks to prepare their submissions.

It was proposed by Cllr. Fahy, seconded by Cllr. Killilea, that the Programme be approved and proceed to the next stage.

3. Overview of Housing and outline of 2015 Work Programme

Mr. Gavican gave a presentation on the various services provided by the Housing Section. He dealt with the various options for provision of social housing; housing grants; tenancy and estate management; control of horses and homeless services.

Cllr. McHugh thanked Mr. Gavican for his presentation, and said that one of the biggest problems facing the Country at the moment was housing, both private and public. There are no new houses being built and prospective buyers cannot obtain mortgages from the Banks. Rents are also on the increase.

Cllr. Burke enquired about the Council's new role in housing people with disabilities. Mr. Gavican replied that Ms. Forde, Senior Social Worker was working on this, and was in the process of seeking expressions of interest from Approved Housing Bodies for their involvement.

Ms. McElmeel queried the building standards in Council Housing, and also what the current situation was with the Part V review. Mr. Gavican said that the housing stock complied with Building Regulations, and there is an Energy Retro-fitting Programme taking place at present. He stated that maintenance was currently done on a reactive basis. A new structure was being introduced on 1st July, 2015 which would have a more proactive approach. The maintenance teams will visit the property and make a checklist of work to be done. Cases may arise where the Council carry out work which is the responsibility of the tenant in order to prevent further damage to the property. This work will be charged to the tenant. This will reduce the turnover time of the properties. With regard to the Part V review, Mr. Gavican stated that no decision has been made to date. Galway County Council are working closely with NAMA to acquire blocks of houses, thus reducing the number of Ghost Estates in the County. The Council were also interested in acquiring vacant stock in town centres.

Cllr. Killilea noted that one hundred new units were acquired annually through house purchase, construction, vacants and Voluntary Bodies. Cllr. Killilea queried what could be done to increase this number, as more and more homeowners were having their properties repossessed, and the housing list would be increasing as a result. Ms. Brann replied that a large proportion of applicants were on the list for the purposes of Rent Supplement only.

Cllr. Fahy queried the cost of dealing with stray horses and what assistance the Department gave regarding same. Mr. Gavican said that a horse lift costs €700, and the Council receive a grant of €400. It was noted that the percentage of horses lifted which were on Council Estates was very small. Cllr. Noone stated that legislation should be amended to transfer this function to the Department of Agriculture.

Cllr. Hynes noted that there are 3259 approved applicants on the housing list. He asked if more use could be made of the Rental Accommodation Scheme. Mr. Gavican stated the Housing Assistance Payment Scheme was being introduced, and this would lead to the phasing out of RAS. HAP involves the tenant sourcing a property, and the Council giving a grant towards the rent. Galway County Council will be administering the Scheme in conjunction with Galway City Council. Cllr. Hynes requested that the Committee be kept updated on HAP.

Mr. Gavican informed the meeting that expressions of interest were sought in connection with Long Term Leasing, and only two submissions were received. An advert has been placed in the local papers this week, seeking expressions of interest from Landlords in relation to the Rental Accommodation Scheme.

Cllr. Noone noted that it was becoming harder for people to own their own homes as they are unable to secure mortgages, due to the new 20% deposit rule. He said the main priority for tenants should be the house, not the location. Ms. Brann stated that at present there was a huge number of Areas of Choice on our housing application form, and this will have to be streamlined. An Allocations Committee has been set up which oversees the allocation of houses.

Cllr. McHugh stated that in the past there was a Tenant Purchase Scheme which gave Council tenants a range of discounts to buy their property. The tenant could avail of a loan from the Local Authority to fund the purchase. Many people now own their own homes as a result of this scheme. He stated that it was one of the best options to generate money to provide new houses. Mr. Gavican noted that the Council can provide loans, but are not regulated. It would be necessary to have an excellent Credit Committee to ensure that no debts would be incurred in future years. Mr. Gavican said that an announcement was expected from the Department with regard to a new Tenant Purchase Scheme.

4. Any Other Business

Mr. Gavican stated that the SPC Schedule of Meetings, and Work Programme for housing would be circulated to Members. All contributions would be welcomed.

The next meeting was fixed for Wednesday 20th May, 2015.

This concluded the business of the meeting.