

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE NA GAILLIMHE

Ceantar Bardasach Chonamara **Municipal District of Conamara**

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Municipal District of Conamara held at the Council Chamber, Aras an Chontae, Galway on the 8th of November 2019 @ 10.00 a.m

ILATHAIR:

Baill:

Cllr. T. Ó'Curraoin Cathaoirleach, N. Thomas, S. Walsh, G. King, T. Welby, E. Mannion, D. Ó' Cualáin, A. McKinstry, P. Mac An Iomaire.

Oifigigh:

P. Breathnach S.E.E Infrastructure-Operations
P. Carroll Administrative Officer, Environment
S. Groarke, Meetings Administrator.

Apologies: G. Mullarkey, Head of Finance

1. Provision of Burial Grounds for Conamara

CMD 19055

Comh. T. O'Curraoin welcomed Deputies Sean Kyne T.D, Eamon O'Cuiv T.D & Catherine Connolly T.D to the meeting and advised that Deputies Noel Grealish T.D & Hildegard Naughton T.D sent their apologies. He explained that the meeting was arranged in order to seek a solution to the funding of land acquisition for the provision of Burial Grounds in Conamara which has developed into a very serious situation. He requested P. Carroll to deliver his report which was as follows:

“There are over 230 burial grounds listed on the Council’s burial ground register. Most of these have burial ground caretakers, who maintain a burial ground register, allocate plots and collect fees. Plots are sold only as they are needed and only single or double plots are permitted. There are over 180 caretakers throughout the county. The maintenance and general upkeep of burial grounds is carried out by Galway Council area offices and/or local community groups. There are over 150 community groups who receive an annual burial ground maintenance grant. Of the 230 burial grounds- a sizeable number of them are nearly full and the demand for provision of extensions is high. Between 2008 and 2018, 12 extensions were completed county wide at a cost of €500,815. Where you exclude extensions where land purchase price is nil or

agricultural value, the average cost per extension rises substantially. There are 12 proposed extensions at various stages of progress. Applying an average for each of €50,000 the cost of providing extensions to all of these burial grounds would be in the region of €600,000.

€50,000 is provided in the annual revenue Budget for the provision of extensions. This is far below the finances required and extensions have only been possible through achieving financial savings elsewhere in the Environment annual revenue Budget. The provision of new burial grounds or extensions to existing ones is posing a serious problem for the Council-in particular, the cost of acquiring land. The Council is not in a position to pay the high costs often sought by landowners. The local communities who wish to continue the tradition of having a burial ground in their parish, will have to assist the Council in obtaining land either free of charge or at agricultural land prices. In situations where the Council provides the land, the local parish/community council should have the responsibility for its development.

Alternatively, it may be necessary to provide a small number of regional burial grounds where they would be more cost effective to provide and operate. A further drain on the Council's limited resources is the increasing number of applications for funding for the repairing of damaged or dangerous walls, removal of dangerous overhanging trees, pathways throughout the burial ground etc. The income generated from burial plot fees falls well short of the cost of the annual payments to caretakers and the burial ground maintenance grant. It is evident therefore that without increased local involvement in the financing and development of new or extensions to burial grounds, the Council will only be in a position to provide a limited number of extensions in the coming years”

P. Carroll circulated maps of North & South Conamara showing the location of Burial Grounds along with his report. He explained that while land was obtained for Burial Grounds such as Leenane, Ballinahown and Bealadangan- the Council cannot get it at agricultural prices for others- which are practically full such as Knock Inverin. Cllr. S. Walsh advised that the Council should seek 3 valuations from auctioneers in regard to suitable land and implement the CPO process if the owner is not willing to sell at the market value- he explained that a figure of €40,000-€50,000 for a ½ acre of land is not a lot when one considers that it is the price of a car. He stated that the Council needs action from the Government to fund the land purchase and referred to the fact that Minister Ring can provide €6m for LIS schemes. Comh. P. Mac An Iomaire explained that he spoke to a landowner last Friday concerning a site for Knock Inverin-he refuses to sell due to the fact that his aunt owned land that was subject to CPO by the Council in the past. He advised that there is other land for sale such as that near the Poitín Stil and the Council should engage with the owners and consider paying €60,000 or €70,000 if that is the price. He stated that Knock Inverin serves a big populated area and people including emigrants have a right to be buried in their own locality. He also advised that the Bealadangan committee are not happy with the outturn of the work on their Burial Ground.

Cllr. E. Mannion advised that there is not enough resources available and that an audit of Burial Grounds should be conducted to establish how many spaces are left and referred to the fact that Clifden and Ardbear are filling up. She explained that a general maintenance plan was also needed for Burial Grounds and that the access roads of which some consist of tracks should be taken in charge by the Council. Cllr. N. Thomas advised that the Council should prioritise the B.G s where capacity is full and determine what land is required and if the land adjacent to the existing B.G cannot be purchased-then seek another site as close as

possible. He requested that the T.Ds seek funding from Central Government as this is a very serious issue for which the Council has no resources. Cllr. G. King advised that Ardbear, Ballyconneely and Clifden B.Gs are nearly full and there is a problem with erosion at Omey and Inis Turbet and storm damage relief is needed. Cllr. A. Mc Kinstry advised that €0.5 million is required from Government immediately as this is an emergency. He stated that the Council should devise a plan to indicate the cost on a year by year basis. He advised that new B.G s should be indicated on the Development Plan and should be 12-15m above sea level to avoid flooding. Comh. D. O’Cualáin advised that Knock Inverin is a priority and the problem is that the Council is reacting to the situation when it is full- a long term plan is required for B.Gs. He enquired if the Council has an inventory of how many B.G s have 3-4 spaces left and if there are other sites like Furbo that have committees who can provide a B.G. Cllr. T. Welby advised that the Council needs to prioritize what needs to be done and he referred to a site at Clynagh where the owner got planning permission and sold it to the undertaker- he is not in favour with the provision of Regional Burial Grounds where the roads are not in charge and could be kept in bad condition. He stated that funding is the problem as landowners have high expectations. Comh. T. O’Curraoin advised of the negative impact of using the CPO process on communities- he referred to the fact that the community in Furbo got the land by agreement and funded the cost by charging up to €1,200 for the plots- if the Council did likewise the burial grounds will pay for themselves. He stated that the Council should sit down with community representatives throughout the County to find out where land is available- in his opinion €50,000 is not excessive as it is the price of a car. He explained that there is a crisis as regards capacity at Ragoon, Knock Inverin and Barna and burials may have to take place in the pathways. The Council has identified land such as in Trá Bhán which the owner is willing to sell but it needs the assistance of the T.Ds to secure proper funding. He also referred to the additional problem of people objecting to the location of burial grounds near them.

Deputy Seán Kyne T.D thanked the elected members for the invitation to the meeting and stated that this is a serious issue which deeply affects the loved ones of deceased members in communities. He advised that he spoke to Minister John Paul Phelan T.D about it and that he will ask Minister Michael Ring T.D if he could re-direct funds to burial grounds. He stated that there is no national pot of money for burial grounds and the response from him could be that the Council can increase the LPT- an increase of 5% would generate an extra €750,000 and this can be ringfenced for burial grounds- other Councils have increased the LPT. He stated that the Council should identify suitable land and consider using the statutory CPO process as a last resort if it cannot get it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly T.D thanked the elected members for the invitation to the meeting and enquired if the 12 proposed extensions listed on the report are the most urgent- she referred to Killeany on Inís Mór and Knock Inverin as urgent. She advised that the most obvious requirement is an audit of spaces in each burial ground as more information including an estimate of the funding is required. She considered that raising the LPT is unfair in light of the fact that Galway County Council is receiving the lowest funding from the Equalisation Fund when compared to other counties. She advised that Council officials need to do a short and a long- term assessment of the problem.

Deputy Eamon O’Cuiv T.D advised that the main issue is that the Council has not been funded properly over the past 20 years and the disparity with counties such as Mayo and

Donegal should be addressed- he referred to the expert group report and stated that while there is a crisis with the funding for burial grounds now - other funding issues may arise later. He explained that the ritual of funerals as a tradition is important to local communities and emigrants and even with the process of cremation the urn containing ashes is left at the family plot. He advised of 2 choices -a community led approach such as that undertaken in Furbo or the private approach where money is invested in the development of B.Gs on the basis of a return- funding can be sought from the Department of Rural & Community Development for car parks.

Cllr. S. Walsh stated that the land beside Knock Inverin is suitable and the Council should not wait until spaces are nearly gone to act. It should get 3 valuations for the land and talk to the landowner – even though it does not want to it may have to use the CPO procedure for the greater good. He advised that when the LPT was set up the then Minister Phil Hogan stated that it would fund all local services- this is not the case with Galway as it is clearly underfunded from the Equalisation Fund. Cllr. N. Thomas stated that he is disappointed that the solution suggested by the Minister is to raise the LPT- people in rural areas are paying the LPT and are not getting the services they need and this is destroying rural Ireland-the Council is clearly underfunded and is struggling to provide essential services.

Deputy Seán Kyne T.D advised that next step is for the Council to identify suitable land to acquire and it may have no alternative but to use the CPO process at times. He accepted the fact that the Council is not getting enough funding and referred to the time when he was a Councillor when they had to raise the rate in 2008. He stated that he will check to see if this problem is nationwide and will consult with Ministers Ring and Phelan as regards funding. He confirmed that he will attend the next MD of Conamara meeting in a month's time in regard to this issue.

CROCHNAIGH AN CRUINNIU ANSIN