

**Minutes of Statutory Budget Meeting of Westmeath County Council held  
on Monday, 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2016 at 10.00 am in the Council Chambers,  
Áras an Chontae, Mullingar**

Cathaoirleach: Cllr. Frank McDermott

Members Present: Cllrs. P. Hill; B. Collentine; J. Shaw; K. Glynn; F. Keena; A. O'Rourke; J. Penrose; M. Dollard; P. Hogan; S. Clarke; U. D'Arcy; E. Wallace; A. Duncan; T. Farrell; J. Dolan; A. Whitney; A. McManus; L. McDaniel and M O'Brien.

Officers Present: P. Gallagher, Chief Executive; J. Dalton, Head of Finance; B. Kehoe, Director of Services; D. Hogan, Director of Services; M. Murray, Director of Services; D. Keating, Financial Accountant; B. Daly, A.S.O., Corporate Services

The Chief Executive presented the Members with his budget statement for 2017 which was followed by commentary from the Head of Finance on the relevant points under each divisional heading. The Members raised queries as follows:

**Division A - Housing and Building**

Cllrs. Dolan, Shaw, Hogan, Clarke, Hill and O'Rourke queried whether adequate staffing was available to deliver the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) service and Mr. Hogan informed the Members that appropriate housing staff levels were in place and confirmed that training had commenced in the previous week. In response to Cllr Dollard, Mr Hogan agreed to hold a presentation before the full Council on HAP at the earliest opportunity. . In reply to Cllr Dollard, Mr Hogan confirmed that a total of 264 Housing Adaptation Grants had been awarded up to last week. Cllr Dollard also asked that Westmeath County Council would seriously consider looking at the Council owned landbank at Canal Avenue, Mullingar. Mr Hogan informed the Members that this land bank was currently being examined but that there were problems with access to the site.

In response to Cllr Glynn, Mr Hogan advised that concerns over the Tenant Purchase Scheme had been raised with the Department.

Cllr Glynn also raised concerns in relation to the condition of Ennell Court Estate where there was serious neglect of the infrastructure in particular the roads and footpaths and he asked that the Council inspect same. In response, Mr Hogan stated that significant work had already been carried out in Ennell Court but agreed that more work was needed and that he intended to bring a Report to the Members in 2017.

In relation to the Mortgage to Rent Scheme, Cllr. Glynn requested that these houses would be included in any planned energy efficiency programmes. In response, Mr Hogan informed the Members that the additional €100,000 for planned maintenance would assist towards carrying out this work.

Cllrs Glynn and Shaw welcomed the net increase in RAS properties. In relation to the Tenant Purchase Scheme, Cllr Shaw queried where the income generated from this scheme was allocated to. In response Mr Dalton advised that this income was dealt with in the Housing Capital account supplementing our share of Government grants and to support required

ongoing investment in our housing stock. He stated that it was hopeful that Westmeath would generate €200,000/€300,000 per annum from this scheme.

Cllr O'Rourke raised concern over inadequate accommodation at Blackberry Lane, Athlone. Mr Hogan informed the Members that Westmeath County Council has applied to the Department for grant aid and that Housing staff were working with the LTACC to seek the residents' support for the proposed works.

Cllrs Hogan and D'Arcy expressed annoyance at the fact that no printed Budget Report was available for the Press at today's Meeting. In response, Mr Dalton apologised for this and organised to have copies printed immediately.

Cllr Hogan queried why the allocation of €19k for Westmeath Homelessness Service was low in comparison to neighbouring counties and Mr Hogan stated that a number of lines in the budget needed to be added together to ascertain Westmeath's total allocation of €254,000 which compared very well with other two Local Authorities. In response to Cllr Hogan's query regarding painting of OPD's and ensuring adequate housing for people with disabilities, Mr Hogan advised the Members that this could be looked at going forward under the planned maintenance budget. Mr Hogan further stated that all houses are assessed to suit the needs of people with disabilities.

Cllr Clarke welcomed the upgrading of the boiler system in Council houses and Mr Hogan informed the Members that this energy efficiency initiative would be rolled out shortly. Regarding the number of housing repair requests logged to date, Mr Hogan stated that he would check this and revert to Cllr. Clarke. In response to Cllr Clarke's query regarding funding for "sensory rooms" for children with autism under the Housing Adaptation Grants, Mr Hogan stated that this could be considered going forward once supported by appropriate medical reports.

As the time had reached 11.15am the Cathaoirleach proposed a 10 minute break and the meeting resumed at 11.25am.

Cllrs Glynn, Dolan, O'Rourke, Penrose and Keena raised the need for the replacement of double glazed windows in certain properties under the Energy Efficiency Programme and Cllr. Dolan pointed out that the windows in some houses in certain areas were of very poor quality. Mr. Hogan agreed that there were a number of issues with faulty windows which the Housing Department was addressing and he stated that further funding would be sought for the next phase of the Energy Efficiency Programme.

Cllr. Hill welcomed the progress being made on housing loan arrears and asked if there was any relaxation of the criteria required to qualify for a Council loan to which Mr. Hogan replied that no changes had been made to this process.

Cllrs Hill and D'Arcy stated that more OPDs were needed in rural areas of Westmeath and Mr Hogan informed the Members that OPDs were being included in new housing capital schemes and specific OPD schemes were under consideration for the smaller towns. Cllr. D'Arcy asked if the Council would consider including technology options when adapting houses for older people and Mr. Hogan replied that this would be subject to budgetary constraints.

In response to Cllr. Wallace's query as to whether other local authorities contribute to the Homeless Service provided by TEAM, Mr. Hogan replied that each local authority makes their own contribution the Homeless Services in their respective county. Cllr. Wallace also

expressed concern over the slow progress in processing Mortgage to Rent applications and Mr. Dalton replied that approximately 36 applications had been completed and as the bulk of prospective candidates had been processed, the number to be processed in this and future years would be lower.

Cllr. Duncan asked if the loans for the houses on lease to Tuath were affecting the Council's balance sheet and Mr. Dalton replied that the interest on these bridging loans were covered by Government leasing scheme and therefore not negatively impacting the budget. Mr Dalton stated that a Government decision was required to permanently address this issue.

In response to Cllr. McDaniel's query on housing deficits, Mr. Dalton replied that the Council was carrying €10m in deficit but that a provision of €65,000 was being made in the budget which would be required for a number of years pending the sale and/or development of land which represented half of this deficit.

### **Division B – Road Transport & Safety**

In response to Cllrs. Farrell, Clarke and O'Brien's concern that the €50,000 allocation for cul-de-sacs was too low, Mr. Kehoe replied that the €200,000 allocated last year was a one-off from NPPR income (from 2015) and that the Municipal Districts could allocate further monies to cul-de-sacs from the District Roads Budget if they wished in due course.

A number of Members stated that the 40% contribution from the applicants for Local Improvement Schemes was too high and asked that it be reduced. Mr. Kehoe replied that when the current applications had been completed, the contribution could be reviewed by the SPC He further stated that, in his view, the residents and landowners on these roads would benefit greatly from the works, which are high quality and will increase the value of and their enjoyment of their properties. In relation to taking these roads in charge when complete, Mr. Kehoe stated that the Council already had a large road network to maintain and, with tight budgets, the most used roads must be prioritised.

Cllr. Farrell asked about the split in funding between Westmeath County Council and TII for public lighting and Mr. Kehoe informed him that TII pay for lights on all national routes. Cllr. Hogan raised concern over the public lighting at Coosan junction and Mr. Kehoe agreed to raise the issue with TII.

Cllr. Hogan requested funding for back lanes in Athlone and Mr. Kehoe informed the Members that these lanes had previously been funded from the Block Grant received by Athlone Town Council but as this was no longer available, the funding would have to be identified from within the Municipal District budget.

Cllrs. Hogan and D'Arcy welcomed the €90,000 provided in the budget for CLÁR funding while Cllr. Hill felt that the allocation was too low. Mr. Kehoe pointed out that this was an estimate based on submissions made to the Department which he hoped would be approved before the end of the month. He confirmed that this funding would focus on rural school safety.

Cllrs. D'Arcy and Hill referred to the damage caused to rural roads by milk tankers and forestry trucks and asked if a different type of road surface could be instated to cater for these trucks. Mr. Kehoe took on board the comments raised and informed the Members that this matter had been raised with the Department as a national issue.

A number of Members raised issues surrounding winter gritting requesting that certain roads be added to the schedule and Cllr. Clarke requested the provision of salt boxes for schools. Mr. Kehoe replied that the distribution of salt storage containers would be dealt with through the Municipal Districts and that there were currently no proposals to add any further roads to the winter gritting schedule.

In response to Cllr. Duncan's request for an allocation in the budget for a footpath from Castletown Geoghegan GAA pitch to the village, Mr. Kehoe replied that this was a matter to be raised at Municipal District level.

Cllr. O'Rourke asked if there was provision in the budget for raising roads in rural areas which were damaged by flooding and was informed that surveys were currently being carried out on certain access roads to facilitate a funding application to the Government in early 2017 for raising these roads.

Cllr. O'Rourke raised the matter of €515,000 from paid parking income being set aside for capital projects in the Mullingar Municipal District and stated that it was his understanding that both Municipal Districts would be treated equally and that there would be no ring-fencing of paid parking income. He was supported in this by Cllrs. O'Brien and Keena. Mr. Dalton stated that since the Local Government Reform Act there was much upheaval and change within local authorities and that paid parking income needed to be dealt with in that context. He advised the Members that in recent times most of the €515,000 was allocated as follows:

- €35,000 for the maintenance of car parks, etc.
- €110,000 to supplement the Parks & Open Spaces budget in MMD
- €100,000 towards the provision of a Regional Sports Centre in Mullingar
- €120,000 towards the upgrade of the Ardmore Road

He further advised that he would like those allocations to be shown in detail in the budget in order to provide more transparency.

A number of Members raised public lighting issues particularly in relation to the maintenance contract and investment in LED lighting. Mr. Kehoe replied that the 2 to 3 year maintenance contract has recently been advertised for renewal and tenders are being examined. He advised that the Council proposed to invest further in LED lights in the future as they are more robust and use less power and, where possible, further funding would be sought from Government towards this investment. The Cathaoirleach queried the cost of replacement poles and whether the Council had to bear this cost and Mr. Kehoe replied that cost varied between €1,000 and €1,500.

Cllr. Wallace referred to the provision in the budget for Road Safety and requested a breakdown. Mr. Dalton replied that the budget provided for 8.64 School Wardens, 5 of which were based in the Mullingar Municipal District and 3 in Athlone. The .64 referred to various general operatives who substituted for the wardens as required. €2,500 was provided towards the Junior School Warden Scheme and the remainder covered salaries and administrative costs for Road Safety Promotion.

#### **Division C – Water Services**

Many of the Members voiced their frustration in relation to the lack of direct communication from Irish Water to Elected members on disruptions to water supply as a result of bursts or outages and the confusion that exists over who to call in relation to this matter. Mr. Murray

replied that the Authority responsible is Irish Water and that Westmeath County Council is complying with its Service Level Agreement in that our website contains a link to the Irish Water website where this information should be available. The Members complained that the general service from Irish Water was not adequate Mr. Murray stated that the delivery of the service through IW utility was a national policy and not a matter for Westmeath County Council. The Members also asked if the text service formerly used by the Council to notify the public of disruptions could be reinstated and Mr. Murray reiterated that communications was now the responsibility of Irish Water as set out in the Service Level Agreement. Mr. Murray agreed to bring the Members concerns to the attention of Irish Water in writing as requested by Cllr. O'Brien.

A number of other issues were raised and in response to Cllr. D'Arcy's query, Mr. Murray stated that the Council currently operated 3 public conveniences and there was no proposal to increase this number. In relation to Cllr. O'Rourke's request for a progress report on the Coosan/Clonbrusk Rehabilitation Scheme, Mr. Murray replied that this application was currently with Irish Water.

As the time was 1.35pm the meeting adjourned for lunch and re-convened at 2.10pm.

#### **Division D – Development Management**

In relation to Diaspora funding, Cllr. D'Arcy asked for a breakdown of the €30,000 budget provision and queried whether Westmeath County Council could adapt the criteria for this funding. Mr. Hogan replied that the funding was made up of €10,000 from Westmeath County Council, €10,000 from Irish Public Bodies Mutual Insurances and €10,000 from Failte Ireland and that the criteria for eligibility was set nationally so could not be influenced by Westmeath County Council.

Cllr. D'Arcy also asked about the salary and budget for the Tourism Officer and whether there would be any interaction between this post and the Heritage Officer. Mr. Kehoe stated that the budget provided for salary costs of €57,000 and a budget of €50,000 and that there would be close liaison between the Tourism Officer and the Heritage Officer.

Cllr. Clarke requested a presentation on the Public Participation Network and Mr. Hogan agreed to arrange this for early 2017. She also asked for a breakdown of the €93,000 provided for Economic Development and Promotion and Mr. Kehoe replied that the bulk of this provision would be dealt with by the SPC.

Cllr. Shaw enquired when the Broadband Officer role would be filled and was informed that this Officer had already been appointed internally. In relation to Leader funding Cllr. Shaw asked when applicants could avail of this fund and the Chief Executive advised the Members that a Service Level Agreement had recently been signed with Westmeath Community Development to whom applicants wishing to avail of this funding should submit an expression of interest. The scheme would be advertised publically early in 2017 and the next meeting of the LCDC would discuss further ways of promoting this fund.

Cllr. Duncan asked what the time-frame was for the appointment of a Heritage Officer and expressed his discontent that the Heritage Forum had not had a meeting for some time. Mr. Kehoe advised that the closing date for receipt of applications for Heritage Officer was 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 2016 and that an appointment would be made without delay. He stated that the previous Heritage Forum had ended and a meeting, to include the new Heritage Officer, would be arranged for early 2017.

In relation to Cllr. Keena's request for a breakdown per Municipal District of the Business Incentive Scheme applications, Mr. Kehoe replied that there were 16 successful applicants in 2016, 10 of which were in Athlone and 6 in Mullingar.

#### **Division E – Environment Services**

A lengthy discussion took place in relation to Civil Defence with the Members voicing their concern at the inadequate facilities available to volunteers for training. On the proposal of Cllr. Duncan and seconded by Cllr. Glynn, it was agreed to deal with Cllr. Duncan's Notice of Motion from the November Council meeting which stated "*Can Westmeath County Council outline its strategy in relation to the sourcing of a permanent home for the civil defence*".

Mr. Murray read his response to the Notice of Motion as follows:

*Westmeath County Council has and will continue to deliver Civil Defence services at a local level through the Civil Defence Officer, a full time employee of the authority. While there is a review under way regarding the current facilities within the 'Cullion Depot' the necessary facilities required to deliver the Civil Defence service are available within our organisation. The review will be completed in January 2017 and it will not only address the provision of facilities for Civil Defence but also integrate the most effective use of our existing facilities for all the existing primary users of the Cullion Depot including Mullingar Municipal District, National Roads Office and Water Services to ensure efficient and best use of resources available in a cost effective manner.*

He further acknowledged the work undertaken by the Civil Defence Officer and his team and agreed to bring a proposal to the Members at the January monthly meeting.

As the November monthly meeting was now due to start the Cathaoirleach requested that Standing Orders be suspended to allow for the continuation of the Statutory Budget meeting, on the conclusion of which the monthly meeting could take place. This was proposed by Cllr. Dolan and seconded by Cllr. Hogan.

The Members welcomed the funding provided under the various headings for environmental services in particular the additional allocation of €45,000 for litter control initiatives which Mr. Murray advised would assist with the review of the Litter Management Plan together with the rollout of new initiatives while advancing further CCTV locations. In response to Cllr. Dolan's query on the civic amenity sites he explained that prices submitted by contractors as part of the tender process carried out earlier in the year resulted in an increase from €40,000 to €169,000 (exclusive of VAT). Following discussion with the Environment SPC, it was unanimously agreed that the service should not be removed and that the Council should commit to the continuation of the service even with the significant cost implications. Cllr. Dolan asked if the recycling facilities would be closed during the handover of the service to the new Contractor and Mr. Murray stated that it may involve a temporary closure for the sites but this will be minimised..

Cllr. Collentine welcomed the provision of €10,000 in the budget for Mullingar Tidy Towns Committee and stated that this would be a great boost to the town. He raised the problem of broken and stolen lifebuoys on the canal and Mr. Murray informed the Members that the Council was currently piloting a GPS monitoring system for lifebuoys which, if successful, could result in a provision being made available in a future budget.

Cllr. Keena requested that a pound be made available for abandoned cars and Mr. Murray agreed to examine this matter and revert to the Council at an early date.

#### **Division F – Recreation and Amenity**

Cllrs D’Arcy, Wallace, Shaw and O’Brien raised concerns regarding the aesthetics of Belvedere House & Gardens. Cllr D’Arcy asked for a breakdown of the budget provision for Belvedere and in response Mr Dalton informed the Members that the operational deficit for Belvedere had halved in recent years. Mr Murray informed the Members that Belvedere received 126,000 visitors last year and numbers are stabilising and being maintained but did agree that there is room for improvement. Cllr Shaw requested that a presentation on Belvedere be made to the full Council in early 2017.

Cllrs Dollard and Glynn requested additional funding for Mullingar Integrated Arts Centre (MIAC). Mr Dalton stated that, respecting all parties involved in the ongoing process to address governance issues that it was not appropriate to consider the issue of additional funding until this process had reached a successful conclusion.

In response to Cllr Glynn in relation to budget provisions for lakeside amenities and Residents Associations, Mr Dalton confirmed to the Members that provision had been made for lakeside amenities.

In response to Cllrs Dolan and O’Brien regarding the €8,000 reduction for Athlone Marina, Mr Dalton advised the Members that this reduction is an allocation of payroll and does not reflect on the service provided.

Cllr Dolan complimented the Library Service throughout the County and in particular to the staff of Moate Library.

Cllr O’Rourke complimented the staff of the Athlone Regional Sports Centre and requested an update on the current loan structure. In response, Mr Dalton informed the Members that there are 2 loans; €673,000 on which 6 years is left and €972,000 on which 5.5 years is left. Cllr O’Brien requested that the newly appointed Tourism Officer would focus on ‘branding’ to promote our Lakelands.

#### **Division G – Agriculture, Education, Health & Welfare**

#### **Division H – Miscellaneous Services**

#### **Division J – Central Management Charges**

Cllr. Dolan requested increased funding for land drainage as he stated that the OPW were reluctant to take on schemes. He also requested that the Council would increase the dog warden services within the County.

In response to Cllr. Wallace’s query as to why Malicious Damage costs were highlighted individually in the budget, Mr. Dalton replied that this was a requirement in legislation, although the provision had not been expending in the last number of years.

Cllr. Wallace, together with Cllr. Hogan, enquired why the Coroner was being funded by Westmeath County Council and Mr. Dalton stated that this was also a statutory requirement.

Cllr Dolan queried the reliability of the IPB dividend income which was now a significant source income. Mr Dalton stated that although not guaranteed, he believed that it was reasonable to provide for the budgeted amount. He further stated that the increasing cost of insurances presented a significant challenge and that the status quo was not sustainable.

In reply to a query raised by Cllr. Clarke in relation to a grant for a feasibility study for Columb Barracks, Mr Dalton confirmed that the Council does not provide such funding but that perhaps that it might be available via LEADER.

In reply to queries raised by Cllr. Hogan, Mr Dalton confirmed that the 2017 budget provides for a workforce of 469 (FTE) of which 199 (FTE) are hourly paid staff.

On the proposal of Cllr Ken Glynn and seconded by Cllr John Dolan the Members unanimously agreed to break for 10 minutes to allow the groups to meet before adopting the Budget.

The meeting re-convened at 4.45pm.

On the proposal of Cllr Ken Glynn and seconded by Cllr John Dolan the Members unanimously agreed to adopt the Westmeath County Council Statutory Budget for the Year Ended 31<sup>st</sup> December 2017.

Cllr. Glynn asked if it was necessary to hold two meetings for the Budget process and requested that the Executive consult with the group leaders to consider holding just one meeting next year. This suggestion was supported by Cllr John Dolan.

The Head of Finance then read Resolution no. 1 as follows:

**“That the County Council adopt for the financial year ended 31 December 2017, the annual budget for Westmeath County Council as circulated by the Chief Executive.”**

This Motion was proposed by Cllr Ken Glynn, seconded by Cllr John Dolan and unanimously agreed.

Resolution no. 2 was then read by the Head of Finance:

**“That in accordance with the Budget for the financial year ending 31 December 2017 as adopted in the foregoing resolution, it is hereby determined that the annual rate on valuation for the several purposes specified in such Budget for such financial year is as follows:-**

**General Annual Rate on Valuation                      54.54**

**It is hereby further determined that the Base Year Adjustment to be applied for the financial year ending 31 December 2017 is as follows:**

**Former Westmeath County Council Rating Area:                      0.00**

**Former Athlone Town Council Rating Area:                      +2.49 (57.03-54.54)**

This Motion was proposed by Cllr John Dolan, seconded by Cllr John Shaw and unanimously agreed.



The Head of Finance then read Resolution no. 3:

**“That in accordance with the provisions of Section 31 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 and Part V of the Local Government (Financial and Audit Procedures) Regulation 2014 it is hereby resolved not to vary the level of rates refunds on vacant properties for all three local electoral areas which make up the administrative County of Westmeath for the financial year ending 31 December 2017.”**

This Motion was proposed by Cllr Tom Farrell, seconded by Cllr Ken Glynn and unanimously agreed.

The Chief Executive, Mr Pat Gallagher thanked the Cathaoirleach, Members, Jimmy Dalton, Head of Finance, the Management Team and staff of the Finance Section for their co-operation, time and assistance in the preparation and finalising of the 2017 Budget. The Cathaoirleach thanked the Executive, Members and staff for a constructive discussion and this concluded the business of the meeting.

---

Cathaoirleach

---

Date