

## COMHAIRLE CHONTAE NA GAILLIMHE

Minutes of Housing SPC Meeting held on Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2024 in the Council Chamber, Galway County Council at 11.00 a.m.

### I Láthair:-

**Baill:** Cllr. Michael Maher (Chairperson)  
Cllr. Eileen Mannion  
Cllr. Shaun Cunniffe  
Cllr. Gerry Finnerty  
Cllr. Declan Kelly  
Ms. Rachel Stewart  
Ms. Helen Jennings  
Mr. AJ Dean

**Oifigigh:** Mr. Michael Owens, Director of Services  
Mr. Gerard Scully, Senior Executive Officer  
Ms. Karen O'Donnell, Senior Executive Officer  
Mr. Damien Mitchell, Senior Engineer  
Ms. Eithne Murphy, Senior Executive Engineer  
Ms. Nuala Heffernan, Administrative Officer  
Ms. Angela Spelman Administrative Officer  
Ms. Michelle Connellan, Vacant Homes Officer, (VHO)  
Mr. Alan Brogan, Executive Engineer, Housing  
Ms. Breda Byrne, Staff Officer, Housing  
Ms. Ciara McGrath, Homeless Support Worker, Housing  
Mr. Kevin Kelly, Executive Technician, Vacant Homes  
Mr. Jason Lavelle, Assistant Engineer  
Ms. Deirdre O'Connor, Tenancy Sustainment Officer, Housing  
Ms. Sheila Slattery, Staff Officer, Housing  
Mr. Brendan Kelly, Assistant Staff Officer, Housing

### Leithscéal

Cllr. Peter Keaveney  
Cllr. Jimmy McClearn  
Mr. Seamus Duffy

The meeting began Mr. Owens congratulated Cllr. Michael Maher's nomination and appointment as Chair of the Strategic Policy Committee for Housing and on behalf of himself and the wider Housing Team he stated that he is very much looking forward to working with both Cllr. Maher and the individual committee members. Mr. Owens confirmed that both he and the Housing Team are committed to delivering on the extensive and comprehensive policy work programme that will be outlined to the SPC members today.

## **1. Minutes of the meeting of 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2024**

The minutes of the SPC meeting held on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 2024 were noted by the Chairperson and deferred for adoption at the next SPC meeting scheduled to take place on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2024. Cllr. Mannion was the only previous committee member present at the meeting as Cllr. McClearn sent his apologies.

## **2. SPC Work Programme 2024 - 2025.**

Mr. Owens gave a brief overview of the key policy initiatives and objectives as set out in the Housing SPC Work Programme 2024 – 2025 document that was supplied to the members prior to the meeting. He outlined that the proposed work programme covers 13 main areas of interest that will be covered during the lifetime of the committee's work. Mr. Owens stated that the document would help to provide the members with a summary level overview of the Master Work Programme and that it was subject to any amendments that the members wished to make either at this meeting or any subsequent SPC meeting. He pointed to item 13 which allows for consideration of Emerging Housing Policy Initiatives that may arise over the term of the current SPC. Mr. Owens explained that item 12 which allows for the discretion of the SPC to bring Presentations by Outside Bodies to the Housing SPC. For example, he explained that the outgoing SPC had been requested to consider a presentation from the Safe Home Programme and he said that this could be included in the SPC Agenda for 2025. Mr. Owens explained that the agendas for each SPC meeting will be formed by consultation with the chair of the SPC when the Master Work Programme is being reviewed.

The Chair thanked Mr Owens for his detailed overview of the SPC Work Programme and he invited the members present for their questions or comments. There were no follow up questions or comments.

## **3. Schedule of Meetings 2024 -2025**

Mr. Owens confirmed that the next SPC meeting is proposed to take place on Thursday the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2024 in the Council Chamber at 11am. He stated that there is a requirement for 4 SPC meetings to be held in 2025, and that a draft programme of meeting dates and times for 2025 will be brought before the members for approval at the December SPC meeting.

#### 4. 'Housing for All' & Housing Delivery Action Plan

##### 4.1 Housing Land Bank - Presentation

Ms. Eithne Murphy (SEE Housing Capital) presented an update on the Housing Land Bank of Galway County Council. Ms. Murphy acknowledged her colleague Jason Lavelle (Assistant Engineer Capital) who assisted her in preparing her presentation. What follows are the key areas she discussed.

- Overview of Galway County Council's current Land Bank.
- Summary of Developable (i.e. Serviced and Zoned) Housing Lands by Municipal District.
- These lands owned by Galway County Council represent 18.83 hectares (or 47 acres) in total area.

Developable Housing Lands – Summary

No.	Location	Area (Ha.)
1	Courtney's Lane, Gort	1.44
2	Station Rd., Oughterard	7.27
3	Cill Rónáin, Inis Mór	2.16
4	Forest View, Mountbellew	0.47
5	Raheen, Athenry	1.13
6	Fairgreen, Roundstone	0.50
7	Oranhill, Oranmore	0.83
8	Dunkellin, Craughwell	2.73
9	Sun St., Tuam	1.34
10	Barrack St., Loughrea	0.07
11	Vicar St., Tuam	0.04
12	Pollroebuck, Loughrea	0.86
<b>Total Area (Ha.)</b>		<b>18.83</b>

The Chair thanked Ms. Murphy for her presentation on the Housing Land Bank and he invited the committee members for their questions or comments on the topic.

In response to queries raised by members Ms. Murphy and Mr. Owens advised as follows:

- Ms. Murphy informed the Chair that approximately 25 housing units could be built per hectare and that this represented a total potential return of less than 500 housing units. She stated that this figure is not much more than the average housing delivery each year.

- Cllr. Mannion asked if there are any plans to deliver housing units on these lands? In response, Ms. Murphy confirmed that these lands are developable and that an Expression of Interest (hereafter EOI) request had been sent out to Developers to develop the lands at Courtney's Lane, Gort.
- Ms. Murphy stated that an EOI request was also sent to the Approved Housing Bodies (hereafter AHB) for the site at Station Road, Oughterard. However, she explained that less than half of this site is R1 Zoned.
- Ms. Murphy said that her team is looking at the possibility of delivering housing units at Forrest View, Mountbellew and Raheen, Athenry. She confirmed that Oranhill is landlocked, while half the lands at Sun Street, Tuam are currently being developed. She stated that Vicar St., Tuam is also being looked at for potential development. Ms. Murphy concluded by saying that most of the sites listed in her presentation were assessed for the development and delivery of social housing units, however, these sites are not fully ready for construction projects.
- Cllr. Mannion asked if any of the AHB's had expressed an interest in developing the council owned lands at Station Road, Oughterard? In response, Ms. Murphy confirmed that the development of this site by an AHB is currently being assessed by the Capital team.
- In response to a query from Cllr. Shaun Cunniffe, Ms, Murphy confirmed that the sites listed in her presentation represented all of the developable lands owned by Galway County Council that are zoned for residential use and have connections to services. She confirmed that the council does own other lands, however, these sites are either not zoned for residential use or don't have wastewater treatment or connections to the relevant services required for residential units.
- Cllr, Kelly stated that he has been contacted by constituents looking to downsize from their larger council properties that no longer meet their current housing need for a smaller property. Cllr. Kelly asked if any work had been undertaken to help older persons downsize from their current council property.
- In response to Cllr. Kelly, the chairperson stated that the two sites in Loughrea, namely the location of the current Fire Station and the Old Gaelscoil were looked at for the development of housing units for older persons.
- Mr. Owens confirmed that his department is conscious of the specific requirements of older persons who are either existing council tenants or are on the Council's Housing Waiting List (hereafter HWL). He stated that several schemes are currently being delivered to address the needs of the elderly and he pointed to the Councils LA Build project at St. Joseph's, Ballinasloe that is being developed to include provision for older persons specific housing. He confirmed that the two sites in Loughrea that were previously mentioned by the Chair are currently being looked at, along with some adjoining lands owned by the Housing Authority to provide housing units for the elderly in Loughrea. He stated that the development of the old Gaelscoil site in Loughrea was subject to the site being rezoned from Community Facilities to that of Residential, as is proposed under the new Loughrea L.A.P. These proposed new developments will allow the council to rightsize/downsize existing council

tenants and provide housing units to those elderly applicants currently on the Council's HWL. Mr. Owens pointed to item 9 on today's agenda, the Housing Capital Programme – Borrowing Requirement, whereby there is a borrowing requirement for local authorities to acquire additional lands for the purpose of providing social housing.

- Ms. Helen Jennings stated that the LA owned site at Raheen, Athenry was identified over 20 years ago for the development of social housing units for both older and disabled persons. Ms. Jennings asked if this was still the intended use of the site.
- In response, Mr. Owens said that there are two land holdings in Raheen, Athenry, one of these located on the Raheen Road has been identified for an Affordable Housing Development, while the land to the rear of the primary Care Centre in Athenry has stage approval for social housing and that will deliver social housing units including for applicants with a disability requirement.

#### 4.2 Affordable Housing – Presentation

Ms. Karen O'Donnell gave an update presentation to the committee on Affordable Housing. The following areas were discussed.

- Affordable Housing Targets

<u>Year</u>	<u>Affordable Housing Target Assigned by the Department</u>
<u>2022</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>2023</u>	<u>42</u>
<u>2024</u>	<u>59</u>
<u>2025</u>	<u>55</u>
<u>2026</u>	<u>55</u>
<u>Total</u>	<u>226</u>

- Affordable Housing Survey, Content and Results
- Garraí Na Gaoithe, Claregalway Update
- Garraí Na Gaoithe Public Information evening
- Affordable Housing Applications for Phase 1 Garraí na Gaoithe
- Affordable Housing Breakfast Briefing with Developers
- Affordable Housing Pipeline
- Cost Rental brief overview

The Chair thanked Ms. O'Donnell for her very detailed presentation and he informed the committee members that all the presentations and reports discussed at today's meeting would be emailed to them after the meeting.

In response to queries raised by members Ms. O'Donnell and Mr. Owens advised the following:

- In response to the Chair, Ms. O'Donnell confirmed that Galway County Council is on track to deliver 150 units by 2026. She stated that it is hoped that any shortfall in the delivery will be offset by additional turnkey and Part V units currently in the pipeline for delivery.
- In response to a query from Rachel Stewart, Mr Owens confirmed that the Affordable Homes target of 226 were determined by the Government as set out under the Housing For All plan. Mr. Owens stated that he is anticipating an increase to the Affordable Homes target for each LA, as prior to the calling of the general election, the government indicated that it wanted to deliver 303,000 homes over the next 5 years. He stated that confirmation is awaited of the new social and affordable delivery targets once the new Government and Housing Minister is appointed. He stated that it is highly likely that there will be an increased target for both Affordable Purchase and Affordable Rent units.
- In response to a follow up query from Ms. Stewart regarding Affordable Apartments, Mr Owens stated that within the Development Plans there is a broad range of population densities that would determine the size and type of affordable units to be delivered in each area. Mr. Owens outlined that income details are sought from applicants of the Affordable Scheme to determine their Purchasing Power when they do not have a Mortgage in Principle agreement in place from a lender. In addition to an applicant's preference for either a house or apartment, determining the applicants purchasing power will allow the Council to develop a profile on each of the 22 settlements that are covered by the survey and this in turn will help to determine the price point that 3 bedrooomed units need to be delivered at to make them affordable. He stated that it is intended to return to the outcome of the survey at the December SPC meeting.
- Cllr. Mannion thanked Ms. O'Donnell for her presentation and highlighted the supply shortage of available 3-bedrooomed social housing units in the county and she asked if the Department dictated the type of units within a particular housing scheme.
- In Response, Mr. Owens confirmed that the location and type of social housing is determined by the Area of Choice and this in turn will help to determine the profile of need in that area be they 1, 2, 3 or 4 bed units. He explained that the profile of the existing stock of social housing in an area would also be considered to identify void or derelict properties that could be renovated or redeveloped for social housing purposes. Once the housing need has been established by Galway County Council, it is at this point that a proposal for a new social housing scheme is submitted to the Department for approval.

- Cllr. Cunniffe asked if the majority of 3 bedroomed units were allocated to families, whereby Ms. O'Donnell confirmed that the Scheme of Allocation will be used to match the housing needs of Housing Support applicants with the correct bed size category.

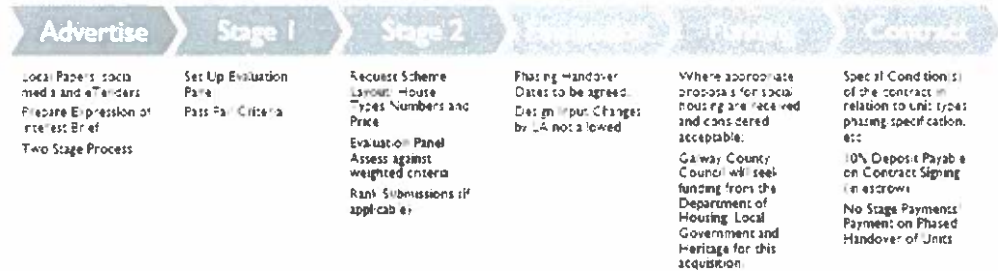
#### 4.3 Social Housing Turnkeys

Ms. Angela Spellman gave an update presentation to the committee on Social Housing Turnkeys. The following areas were discussed.

- **Introduction:**
  - Housing for All Plan to 2030.
- **Turnkeys:**
  - homes built by developers on private land under contract for local authorities or AHBs.
  - They are a good source of social housing that can often be delivered quickly, and often in areas where the local authority does not have land.
  - Galway County Council proposes to invite expression of in interest for turnkey acquisitions whereby, home builders and housing developers are being asked to consider offering properties with planning permission, to Galway County Council
- **Objective:**
  - The Council is seeking to purchase housing units for social housing through Turnkey Developments in specific towns with social housing need across Galway.
  - The Council is inviting proposals from Private Developers and Building Contractors who are in a position to supply such units within a reasonable timescale.
  - It is an objective of the Council to create sustainable communities by encouraging a mix of social and private housing in the community. Proposals, by way of Expressions of Interest, will be invited for the sale to Galway County Council of housing schemes in County Galway.
  - Proposals should have planning permission or be based on land correctly and appropriately zoned under the Galway County Development Plan 2022- 2028. Any proposal based on the development of land within the strategic reserve will not be considered.
- **Process:**
  - This request for Turnkey Expressions of Interest will be valid for 6 months.

- A minimum of two Turnkey Expressions of Interest will be advertised per annum.

- **Workflow:**



The Chair thanked Ms. Spellman for her detailed presentation, and he invited the members for any comment or questions that they any have.

In response to queries from the committee, the following replies were given.

- In response to a question from AJ Dean regarding stage payments, Ms. Spellman confirmed that the Turnkey acquisition process is exempt from the current procurement legislation, and this means that payment can only be given upon completion of the project. Thus, it is at the final stage of acquisition that the payment can be made.
- In response to a query from Cllr. Cunniffe, Mr. Owens stated that the EOI was submitted on the basis the developer was already granted planning permission. This in turn allows the developer to seek finance from their lender on the basis that they have a signed contract with the Local Authority to acquire a set number of housing units that meet the required building standard. He explained that the cost of the finance sought by the developer is built into the overall costs for the development that is submitted to the Local Authority at the EOI stage.
- In a follow up query Cllr. Cunniffe asked if there was a minimum sized Turnkey scheme. In response, Mr Owens stated that this year GCC accepted a Turnkey development with 2 units.
- In response to a query from Cllr. Cunniffe, Mr. Owens stated that Part V developments were not limited to Social Housing, and under the new Planning Act, Part V will now be referred to as being Part VII. He explained that under the 20% requirement under Part V/Part VII that Local Authorities now have the discretion, on a development-by-development basis to designate 10% for either Social Housing or 10% for Affordable Housing. Mr. Owens referenced the Affordable Surveys discussed by Ms. O'Donnell, whereby he said that these surveys will help to gauge the demand for Affordable Schemes within the 22 settlements identified in Galway County. He stated that it is anticipated that the additional 10% requirements will be used for the development of Affordable units where demand exists and viability can be achieved.



- Cllr. Cunniffe, stated that the feedback that he was getting was that it was better for developments to be a mixture of both private and social housing units.
- Cllr. Manion welcomed the fact that she had recently attended a sod turning event at a 30-unit Turnkey Development in Clifden.
- In response to the Chair, Ms Spellman stated that there would be basic requirements for passing stage 1 of the application process, whereas Stage 2 would require a more weighted criteria to pass to the next stage of finalisation. This pass or fail criteria is based on multiple factors such as location, unit types and price etc.
- Ms. Spellman stated that it is an objective to create sustainable communities by encouraging a mix of both social and private housing units.
- In response to Rachel Stewart’s question on the prospect of Infrastructural problems, Ms. Spelman responded by saying that applicants to the Turnkey Scheme have already been granted Planning Permission. However, she acknowledged that developments may face some challenges due to the infrastructural deficit within the county.
- Ms. Stewart asked if anything could be done on the Planning side to speed up applications. In response, Ms. Spellman stated that the Council would be advertising the Turnkey Scheme twice a year.
- Mr. Owens stated that the Council recently hosted a very successful Affordable Housing Breakfast Briefing recently that has led to greater engagement and awareness amongst the developers. He stated that as an early initiative of the SPC a similar briefing to raise awareness of the Part V and Turnkey Schemes would be held.

## **5. Vacancy Activation Programme 2024**

Ms. Breda Byrne gave an update presentation to the committee on the Vacancy Activation Programme. The following areas were discussed.

- Geo-Directory Vacancy Data Survey
  - Introduction
  - Determine Vacancy, reuse existing buildings and reduce vacancy.
  - Growth and development of our communities
  - Bring back life to Vacant properties.
- Purpose of survey – determine vacancy.
  - Geo-Directory Vacancy Data Survey for all Local Authorities
  - Galway County Council 1708 properties surveyed in 43 Settlements.
  - Approximately 1km buffer of Settlements
- Results - 817 properties were deemed Vacant (773) / Derelict (44)
- Summary Table:

**Initial Assessment of Vacancy Data**

Number of Properties Surveyed	1,708
Number of Properties Vacant / Derelict	817 (773/44)
Condition of the Properties	
Good Condition	114
Fair Condition	254
Poor Condition	375
Uninhabitable	74

• **Properties Vacant by Municipal District**

Total by MD	Total Survey	Total Vacant / Derelict
Athenry	190	73
Ballinasloe	182	127
Connemara	422	174
Loughrea	594	240
Tuam	320	203
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,708</b>	<b>817</b>

• **Properties Not Vacant by Municipal District**

N/A Not Vacant	Total per MD
Athenry	117
Ballinasloe	55
Connemara	248
Loughrea	354
Tuam	117
<b>Total</b>	<b>891</b>

• **CPO ACTIVATION PROGRAMME**

- CPO Activation Programme Launched April 2023.
- Adopt a proactive, planned, and systematic approach to identify and activate vacant and derelict properties.
- Targets 2024
  - 175 properties = Enter Activation Programme
  - 3 properties = Enter Compulsory Acquisition Process

• **Identify Vacant Properties:**

- Vacant Homes Team has reviewed and assessed the Survey Data.
- 40 properties identified for Initial Activation.
- Tuam (9), Loughrea (7), Ballinasloe (7), Connemara (9) and Oranmore/Athenry (8).

• **Engagement With Owners:**

- Written Correspondence issued to property owners on the 6th November.
  - Two-week timeframe for owners to reply, setting out their intentions how they will bring property back in to use.
  - Contact details of Vacant Homes Team and guidance leaflet furnished to property owners.
- **CPO Activation Programme**
    - Failure to receive a response:
    - Reminder letter will issue 21st November 2024.
    - Failure to return property to use
    - Galway County Council will consider compulsory acquisition where deemed necessary.

The Chair thanked Ms. Byrne for her very detailed presentation, and he invited the members for any comment or questions that they any have.

- The Chair stated that we have no choice but to CPO vacant and derelict houses if we want to reduce the vacancy rate within the county. He stated that several constituents had contacted him to say that they owned a vacant and derelict property and that they were not aware of the Vacant Homes Tax (VHT) and that they were liable for this charge. He stated that they were also liable to pay the Local Property Tax for these homes, but that the Vacant Home Tax was three times the LPT amount. He stated that these charges would remain on the property until it is sold by the owners. The chair noted that this payment was a separate declaration to Revenue and that these owners were not aware of its existence.
- Ms. Helen Stewart asked what the criteria for non-vacant dwellings. In Response, Ms. Byrne stated that these houses were occupied. Of these, some were found to be Holiday Homes or businesses, but they were being used in some capacity. She stated that the information used in the survey came from the Geo-Directory, and a significant number of occupied dwellings were incorrectly identified as vacant from data on the Deo-Directory, low EBS usage and non-delivery items from An Post.
- In a follow up query, Ms Stewart asked if the home of a nursing home resident was considered as being vacant? Ms. Byrne, replied by saying that for the purpose of the survey, the homes were deemed as being vacant.
- In relation to Case Study 2 (last in the Line) in Ms. Byrne's presentation, Cllr. Mannion asked how do you plan to go about acquiring this property? Ms. Byrne said that each property will be assessed on a case-by-case basis, and she outlined that they will be investigated further to ensure that they are the persons who are indeed the last in a line.
- In a follow up query, Cllr. Mannion stated that she had noticed at least 40 vacant properties while out canvassing and she asked Ms. Byrne to explain the criteria that was used to identify the 40 Homes for Initial Activation.
- In response to Cllr. Mannion, Ms Byrne stated that the 40 vacant homes were identified and revisited by Mr. Kevin Kelly who is member of the Vacant Homes

Technical Team, to ensure that they had not been brought back into use since they were first surveyed. Ms. Byrne stated that Mr. Kelly's follow up visit revealed that a surprising number of buildings had been brought back into use. Ms. Byrne stated that one of the main criteria of the Department was to identify property's that could be turned around for habitation quickly, with a minimum amount of works required.

## **6. Disposal of Derelict Housing Stock – Review**

Mr. Owens updated the committee on the Disposal of Derelict Housing Stock. The following areas were discussed.

- There are a small number of social housing units that have become derelict due to the lack of a housing demand in that area or that the funding needed to bring them back into circulation was not available. These units are now deemed derelict and beyond economic repair.
- In these instances, the Local Authority brings forward derelict housing stock for sale through an Auctioneer or Estate Agent that advertises the properties online and in local newspapers and they negotiate with potential purchasers to agree a sale price.
- These Section 183 Disposals are a Reserved Function of the Elected Members, and they must be voted on at Plenary to approve the sale. The relevant permissions are outlined in Section 183 of the Local Government Act.
- Two tranches of Disposals have gone before the Council Members for approval in recent months, and it was determined to refer the Disposal matter to the Housing SPC to determine if there should be restrictions placed on some of these properties. For example, should a local housing need apply to the purchaser or should the purchaser live within that area.
- Any restriction imposed may have an impact on the sale price of the property, thus reducing the proceeds of any sale funds.
- The Department had originally paid for the purchase or building of these houses.
- The proceeds of these Disposals are retained by the Local Authority as an Internal Capital Receipts (ICR), however, the Department has to provide approval for their allocation or use.
- ICR are held within the Capital Account, and they are allocated by the consent of the Department.
- The SPC has been asked to consider the Disposal of Derelict Housing Stock and to raise any issues the members may have, with a view to presenting a paper to a future meeting of the SPC. Thereafter, it is proposed that the SPC would then submit a recommendation to the Plenary Council.
- 4 Disposal properties were approved at the October Plenary meeting and the remaining 3 disposals will be included in November's agenda for approval.
- Any restrictions that are placed on the Disposal of Properties would be from 2025 onwards. There are a small number of properties yet to be disposed of by way of Section 183.

- These derelict houses are owned by the Local Authority, while the Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) of derelict properties mentioned above in the Vacancy Activation Programme presentation would be purchased either by agreement or by CPO to make the property available for occupation once more.
- Properties acquired by CPO may be used by the LA for Social Housing or if there is no Social Housing need in that area, then they can be disposed of by way of Section 183, subject to approval by the Elected Members at Plenary.
- It is important to note that any restrictions imposed on the sale of existing derelict units would not apply to these derelict units acquired by consent or by CPO.
- Today's review presentation will lead to a draft policy document that can be brought before the SPC and Plenary as appropriate.

The Chair thanked Mr. Owens for his very detailed update, and he invited the members to ask any questions make any comments or questions that they any have.

- Cllr. Mannion stated that this issue arose due to the sale of a derelict Council House at Cleggan, Connemara that was located in a very scenic location. She stated that there was a proliferation of holiday home in that location and some locals were upset that it was sold to a purchaser from outside the community and that locals had found it very hard to get planning permission in that area. Cllr. Mannion referenced the sale of another derelict unit at Doonreaghan, Cashel and she suggested that the selling of these housing units be sold to persons living in the community with a Housing Need.
- Cllr. Cunniffe, said that he very much agreed with Cllr. Mannion's statements and he said that he would be in favour of bringing the house back into the existing housing stock or selling it to a locally based person with a Housing Need.
- The Chair said that he would have concerns regarding the costs associated with these derelict units, as the Council could end up paying the VHT owed to Revenue.
- He stated that the council must get our money back and as such the sale price should reflect what the council is owed for the property.
- In reply, Mr. Owens confirmed that there was a considerable amount of interest in the Cleggan property, and he confirmed that the more restrictions that are placed on a Disposal property reduces the market of available purchasers and the sale price. He stated that Legal advice will also need to be sought from our Law Agents office to confirm the type of restrictions that can be attached to these sales. Mr. Owens encouraged the Members to submit any recommendations to him directly or to the SPC Administrator Brendan Kelly, ASO Housing Capital Office.
- Cllr. Mannion stated that the first step required would be the seeking of Legal Advice on the issue.

## **7. Differential Rent Review – Update**

Ms. Nuala Heffernan updated the committee on the Differential Rent Review. The following areas were discussed.

- **Establishment of Rent Review Team**
  - A new rent review team was established recently to review Council and Housing Assistance Payment/RAS rents on a regular basis.
  - 5 members on the team, including 3 experienced housing staff
- **Tenancies**
  - 3,042 tenancies in Galway County Council owned properties
  - 1,300 tenancies in privately owned properties supported by Housing Assistance Payments
- **Rent Review Timeframe**
  - Initially, 50 tenants will receive written correspondence at beginning of December, requesting that information is submitted by mid-December.
  - Further reviews will be completed in 2025
  - Rents will be reviewed and updated by the rent review team as documentation is received.
  - Documentation will be accepted via e-mail or ordinary post.
  - On-line option is being developed in collaboration with the IT Section and the Data Protection Officer
  - Processes will be streamlined for the tenant and the Council to allow for rent reviews to be completed and new rent implemented annually
- **Rent Review Process**
  - Tenants will receive written correspondence advising them that a County-wide rent review is underway.
  - Correspondence will include a rent review form for completion and submission by the tenant.
  - The supporting documentation to be compiled and submitted with completed form will be detailed in the correspondence.
  - Tenant will be required to submit documentation within 2 weeks.
  - Maximum rent will be applied should the tenant not return the requested information.
  - **Rent Review will be completed and corrected rent implemented for the period since the tenants last rent review.**
  - Regular updates will be provided on progress of the rent review.
- **Rent Review Contacts**
  - **Rents Team are available to provide assistance with any queries you or tenants may have –**
  - [housingrents@galwaycoco.ie](mailto:housingrents@galwaycoco.ie)
  - **091 - 509302**

The Chair thanked Ms. Heffernan for her informative presentation, and he opened the topic up to the members for any comments or questions they may have.

In response to questions and comments from the members, the following responses were issued.

- Cllr. Declan Kelly said that he was concerned about the prospect of a Rent Review due to the ongoing cost of living crisis and measures that have been implemented in the National Budget. He stated that any increase to council tenants rents now would only add to their current financial difficulties. Cllr. Kelly asked if Council Rents were set to rise in 2025? He said that the State was giving with one hand and taking with the other as they tried to assist persons on a low income with the increased cost of living.
- In response, the Chair said that he believed that rents would increase, and he asked Mr Owens to respond to Cllr. Kelly's query.
- Mr. Owens stated that rent is calculated based on a tenant's income and their ability to pay rent under the Differential Rent Scheme and the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). He stated that tenants are obliged to notify the LA of any changes to their income as their rent is based on their most recent income. The Differential Rent Scheme sets out how a LA calculates a tenants rent based on the total household income. He stated that the Differential Rent Scheme was reviewed on an ongoing basis every couple of years. Mr. Owens said that there is no intention to review the Differential Rent Scheme itself, however a Rent Review would require all council tenants to submit their current income and calculate their rental amount under the existing Differential Rent Scheme. If a tenant has not notified the Council that their income had increased, then the amount of rent owed will be calculated and back dated to that date. Similarly, any over payment of rent will be backdated and promptly refunded to the tenant.
- Mr Owens outlined that there is a maximum rent set at €132.00 Per Week and this is lower set at €27.00 for OAP's. The rent review will require all council tenants to submit their up-to-date household income details for assessment under the Differential Rent Scheme.
- Cllr. Maher said that he had spoken to a constituent of his recently and he informed him that he was to report any changes in his income to the Housing Rents Section.
- Cllr. Mannion asked if the double payment received by social welfare recipients was assessed under the scheme. Ms. Heffernan confirmed that they were not considered when the Rent is assessed.
- In response to a query from Cllr. Cunniffe, Mr. Owens confirmed that an applicant's income was initially assessed for the purpose of eligibility for Social Housing and the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). Thereafter, any changes to a tenant's income only applies to the amount of rent they have been assessed to pay, which is subject to the above-mentioned rent cap.

## **8. Draft Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025 – 2029 – Update**



Ms. Nuala Heffernan updated the committee on the Draft Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025 – 2029. The following areas were discussed.

- **Section 10 Housing (Traveller Accommodation Act) 1998**
- Local Authority is required to prepare, adopt and implement their sixth Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025 – 2029 by 31<sup>st</sup> December 2024.
  
- **Preparation and Consideration of DRAFT Traveller Accommodation Programme**
  - December 2023/January 2024 – Notice to Stakeholders before making assessment of need
  - 7 Submissions received
  - January/February 2024 – Conduct Assessment of Need
  - May/June 2024 – Draft Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025 – 2029 prepared
  - Draft TAP 2025 – 2029 at LTACC 05<sup>th</sup> July 2024
  - 12<sup>th</sup> July 2024 – Publication of notice of DRAFT TAP programme 2025 – 2029
  - Submissions accepted until 13<sup>th</sup> September 2024
  - 3 submissions received –
  - Galway Simon
  - CENA
  - Galway Traveller Movement
  
- **Traveller Accommodation Programme Summary of Submissions Received**
  - Ensure realistic plan is in place
  - Ensure regular review of delivery of targets in the TAP 2025 – 2029
  - Implement recommendations of the Traveller Accommodation Expert Review Programme Board
  - Ensure delivery of TAP 2025 – 2029 adheres to Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty
  - Continuous consultation with Traveller community regarding the TAP 2025 – 2029
  - Develop a Communications Policy for the TAP 2025 – 2029, to include anti-racism code of practice
  - Amend housing policies to accommodate Traveller cultural practices, to allow for caravans and mobile homes in Traveller Specific Accommodation
  - Ensure all available TAP funding is drawn down
  - Ensure all refurbishments and construction are to a high-quality standard
  - Ensure halting sites are built to a high-quality standard
  - Provide transient sites in the County
  - Use a variety of methods of communicating with Traveller families to gather feedback
  - Support young Travellers at risk of homelessness



- Develop a working relationship with CENA to deliver appropriate Traveller Specific Accommodation
- Draft TAP 2025 – 2029 was updated in September 2024 to reflect submissions received.
- Draft TAP 2025 – 2029 was discussed and considered by the LTACC on 04<sup>th</sup> October 2024
- Members of the LTACC proposed and agreed to recommend the Draft Traveller Accommodation Programme
- 2025 – 2029 to the Plenary Council for their consideration and adoption, if appropriate.

The Chair thanked Ms. Heffernan for her informative presentation, and he opened the topic up to the members for any comments or questions that they may have.

There were no comments or questions from the Members.

## **9. Housing Capital Programme – Borrowing Requirement**

Mr. Owens updated the committee on the Housing Capital Programme – Borrowing Requirement. A copy of the Housing Borrowing Requirements document was supplied to the members before the meeting. The following areas were discussed.

- This report supplied to the Members outlines the borrowing requirements essential to fund critical housing projects and schemes, aimed at addressing housing shortages, promoting affordable and cost rental options, regenerating communities by bringing vacant properties back into use and investing in existing social housing. The approval of loans to a total value of €66.5 million is required and recommended for the various schemes as outlined below.
  1. Planned/Preventative Housing Maintenance Investment Programme – €10 million
  2. Land Acquisition Borrowing - €10 million.
  3. 3Affordable Housing - Bridging Finance - € 25 million.
  4. Cost Rental – Long Term Loan - €8.5 million.
  5. Local Authority Home Loan & Local Authority Purchase and Renovation Loan – Long Term Loan - €8 million.
  6. CPO Activation Programme - €5 million.
- The approval of a loan is a reserved function in accordance with Section 106 of the Local Government Act 2001 (as amended). The approval of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is also required.
- The loans will be drawn down as required based on the applicable fixed/variable rate available from the Housing Finance Agency at the time of draw down.
- The approval of the various loans as detailed above will represent a significant investment by Galway County Council in the delivery and regeneration of housing across the County of Galway. It will also represent a further demonstration of the joint commitment of the

Elected Members and Executive to address a key corporate priority of the local authority to deliver housing in sustainable communities.

SUMMARY OF HOUSING BORROWING REQUIREMENT @ NOVEMBER 2024			
Service Area	Bridging / Long Term	Estimated Amount	
Land Acquisition	Long Term	€10,000,000	
Planned Maintenance	Long Term	€10,000,000	
LA Home Loan	Long Term	€8,000,000	
CPO/Vacancy Activation	Bridging		€5,000,000
Affordable - Purchase	Bridging		€25,000,000
Affordable – Rental	Long Term	€8,500,000	
<b>Sub-Total</b>		<b>€36,500,000</b>	<b>€30,000,000</b>
<b>OVERALL TOTAL</b>		<b>€66,500,000</b>	

It is intended to present the above proposal for consideration at the November Plenary Meeting.

- Mr. Owens stated that there was a minimum borrowing requirement of €66.5 million and that it was a matter for the Minister for Housing to decide if the full €66.5 million was granted or to approve a lesser amount. In the event that the full borrowing requirement is not approved, then Galway County Council will not be in a position to deliver on the full commitments associated with the borrowing.

The Chair thanked Mr. Owens for his very detailed outlining of the current Borrowing Requirement and he opened the floor to the members to make any comments or queries that they may have.

In response to questions and comments from the members, the following responses were issued.

- The Chair stated that the members present had no choice but to recommend approval of the Borrowing Requirement as outlined by Mr. Owens.
- In response to a query from Cllr. Cunniffe, Mr Owens confirmed that the only affect on the Revenue Account would be Planned Maintenance, whereas everything else would go through the Capital Account.
- Cllr. Cunniffe said that the funding for Housing Units should be paid directly from Central Government, rather than looking for loans and paying interest.
- Cllr, Cunniffe asked if GCC had any other outstanding Loans for Planned Maintenance?

- In response, Mr. Owens confirmed that that the current variable rate for mortgage borrowing was being offered at 3% by the Housing Finance Agency and for non-mortgage borrowing the rate was 3.25%. He outlined that rate for a 30-year fixed loan was set at 3.3%.
- He confirmed that there are no outstanding loan commitments for Planned Maintenance. However, in relation to the previous land acquisition approval there is a current remaining balance of just over €4 million.
- Ms. Rachel Stewart commented that developers were currently finding it really difficult to source funding for housing, and she welcomed the proposed borrowing requirement and Galway County Councils efforts to meet the housing targets.
- In response. Mr. Owens referenced the existence of the Galway Housing Delivery Task Force (Chaired by John McCarty) whose purpose is to address issues that are directly affecting the delivery of Housing Units in Galway City and County and referenced recommendations presented to the Task Force by Galway County Council relating to the waiver of development contributions be continued to be implemented as a means of delivering housing be they Social, Affordable or Cost Rental units and that the Housing Finance Agency provide finance at a lower rate for developers who are intending to build Social, Affordable or Cost rental housing.
- In response to a query from AJ Dean, Mr Owens stated that the next meeting of the taskforce will take place at the end of November. He stated that he is happy to bring any proposals that the SPC members might have to the Task Force for consideration. Mr Owens said that the Task Force is represented withing the Department at a very high level and it is responsible for bringing forward various recommendations and proposals to aid the increased delivery of housing units.

On the proposal of Cllr. Mannion, seconded by Cllr. Maher it was unanimously agreed to recommend the approval of the full borrowing requirements to Plenary.

## **10. Any other Business**

- The Chair advised that Cllr. Jimmy McClearn requested that he highlight his concerns regarding the Housing Aid For the Elderly process which is very slow and there are a lot of applicants still waiting to be assessed for the grant.
- In response, Mr. Owens listed the three categories of grants available as follows:
  - Mobility Aid Grant
  - Housing Adaptation Grant
  - Housing Aid for Older People Grant
- These grant applications are processed and paid out by the Local Authority.
- Mr. Owens stated that there have been issues regarding the recruitment and retention of staff, particularly within the Inspectorate Unit that inspect each property prior to the required works being carried out. An interim proposal

was introduced that would allow applicants to receive a grant award without a site inspection for limited works on an exceptional basis to year-end.

- Mr. Owens confirmed that two new members of staff would be joining the inspectorate Unit in November and December, and this will allow Housing to address the backlog of grant applications.
- A decision was made to prioritise the Housing Grants Inspection some months ago and this has also helped to reduce the backlog of applications requiring an inspection.
- Other changes to the Housing Grant scheme include.
  - The maximum level of grant funds that can be awarded has been increased by 30%.
  - The maximum Income eligibility amount has been increased by 25%.
  - Changes have been made to the way that the Household income is calculated.
  - The LA Matching Funding requirement has been reduced from 20% to that of 15%, whereby the Department now contributes 85% of the available grant funds.

Cllr. Cunniffe wished to convey his thanks to Mr. Owens and all his staff for all the hard work that they carry out on a day-to-day basis. He also commended all of the speakers at the meeting, and he offered his assistance in any way that would aid the provision of the services provided by the Housing Department.

The Chair informed the members that the next meeting will take place on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2024. The Chair then concluded the meeting.

**Minutes confirmed by Chairperson**



**Cllr. Michael Maher**

Date: 12/12/2024