

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE NA GAILLIMHE

Minutes of Housing, SPC Meeting held on Wednesday, 20th May, 2020 in the Council Chamber

I Láthair:-

Baill:

Cllr. Joe Byrne, Chairperson
Cllr. Jimmy McClearn
Cllr. Eileen Mannion
Cllr. Seamus Walsh
Cllr. James Charity
Cllr. Tim Broderick (via MS Teams)

Mr. Enda McGuane, Business
Ms. Cathy McGrath, Social Inclusion (via MS Teams)
Ms. Tara Flynn, Construction Sector (via MS Teams)

Oifigigh:

Mr. M. Owens, A/ Director of Services, Housing
Ms. J. Brann, Senior Executive Officer, Housing
Mr. G. Scully, Senior Executive Officer, Housing (via MS Teams)
Ms. R. Lowe, S.E. Housing
Ms. N. Heffernan, Administrative Officer, Housing
Mr. J. Kearns, Executive Engineer
Ms. S. Slattery, A.S.O. Housing

Apologies:

Cllr. Colm Keaveney
Ms. Marcella Conneely, Clúid Voluntary Housing

1. Welcome and Introduction of Members

Cllr. Byrne welcomed the Members to the meeting. He stated that the role of the Committee was to monitor and review policies, and it was important that the Committee did not impinge on the role of the Executive. Each member formally introduced themselves and gave details of their respective roles. Cllr. Byrne welcomed the Members and said that he was looking forward to working with them.

2. Overview of Housing Services and Policies

Ms. Brann gave an overview of housing services and policies, and the aims of the Housing Unit. Details of the achievements of the Housing Unit for 2019 were outlined. Ms. Brann stated that the year ahead would be a challenging one with ambitious targets to be met.

Ms. Lowe gave details of the Capital and Maintenance Teams in Housing, who were tasked with increasing housing supply, delivery of a land bank, the improvement of rental standards and the maintenance of houses. It was envisaged that the Maintenance Section would move towards planned maintenance in the future, rather than reactive maintenance.

Cllr. Byrne thanked Ms. Brann and Ms. Lowe for their presentations.

Cllr. Mannion also thanked them for their presentations, and stated that she was a Member of the previous Committee, and that a lot of great work had been achieved. She thanked the Housing staff for their work, and congratulated them on their achievements. Cllr. Mannion welcomed the new Members of the Committee.

3. Housing SPC Work Programme

Cllr. Byrne informed the meeting that given the volume of work that the Committee had to deal with, he was anxious that the Committee would meet more frequently this year. Cllr. Byrne requested that correspondence be circulated well in advance of the meetings to allow Members time to examine same. Cllr. McClearn stated that the previous Committee had not met for nearly twelve months, so there were a lot of outstanding matters to be dealt with. Mr. Owens acknowledged that a number of issues were outstanding, and confirmed that the Housing Staff would be available to support and liaise with the Committee. It was agreed that the Work Programme would be considered at the next meeting.

4. West Region Homelessness Action Plan 2020 -2022

Mr. Owens stated that the West Region Homelessness Action Plan was prepared in conjunction with Galway City Council, Roscommon County Council and Mayo County Council. It is a high level framework document which must be adopted by each County Council. Following adoption of the Plan, each Council will develop their own Homeless Action Plan within twelve weeks.

Mr. McGuane stated that under the Housing First Policy, there was a limit to what the Local Authorities can do, and that external bodies should be included. Mr. Owens stated that Cope and Galway Simon deliver services in the City, and it was proposed to extend this to the County. This scheme was 90% funded by the Department, and 10% by the Local Authority. The Housing First programme is 100% funded by the Department, and there is a challenging target of nineteen units over three years. Wrap around services and support are critical. The Scheme is focused on singles and couples, i.e. one bed units. It will be important to avoid a cluster of Housing First tenancies in any given area.

Cllr. Charity said that the figures in the report were startling, especially the expenditure on homeless services. He queried if the long-term plan was to provide directly managed or Council owned properties. Mr. Owens replied that the bulk of the costs were incurred on private emergency accommodation to facilitate larger families, e.g. hotels, B & B's, self-catering units. Family hubs have been established as an interim measure to facilitate own door emergency accommodation. Properties owned by Approved Housing Bodies have been made available to agencies such as Simon and Cope on a transitional basis. Galway County Council provide transitional support by means of a Licence Agreement, and these tenants will eventually move to their own tenancy. Single people may share accommodation on an own door basis. Galway County Council are currently working with the Peter McVerry Trust, and three properties are being made available under the repair and leasing scheme to the Trust. There are currently only three families in emergency accommodation at present, and ten singles who will be transitioning to tenancy agreements in the near future. This model is an appropriate and sustainable approach. Cllr. Byrne said that there are a number of hidden homeless, who are currently sofa surfing. On the proposal of Mr. McGuane, seconded by Cllrs. Charity and Walsh the Plan was adopted.

5. Galway County Council Draft Housing Allocation Scheme

Cllr. Byrne asked if this item could be deferred to a further meeting of the Committee.

Mr. Owens advised that the item was on the Agenda for the next Plenary Council Meeting on 25th May, 2020, for consideration only, and will revert to Plenary Council for adoption at a later date. Cllr. McClearn said it will be necessary to establish a procedure for dealing with items at the Plenary Meeting, given the time constraints involved for meetings currently.

Cllr. Mannion stated that all the Members of the Council had received the document, and could seek clarification on any issues prior to the meeting.

Mr. Owens outlined the proposed changes to the document, and stated the amendments made reflected previous discussions in the Chamber. The main change is dealt with under 3.8, and reflects the emerging housing need. It will reduce the number of households on the two bed

list, and increase the number on the three bed properties list. This amendment will allow for a fair and balanced approach and will ensure a more equitable waiting period on the housing list, as there are a significant number of three bed properties available. Cllr. Byrne asked what the Council was doing to cater for the extra demands for housing. Mr. Owens said that the Council's overall stock profile can only change by means of leasing and acquisition. It was noted that 80% of the Build Programme would be for 1-2 bed units, as there was a significant increase in this category of applicants.

Cllr. Charity queried if there was any flexibility or discretion in the allocation of a property, especially in exceptional circumstances, and the relevance of the time on the list. Mr. Owens confirmed that the Scheme operated under strict guidelines and regulations and there is very limited discretion available to local authorities. The profiles are important as they determine the capital investment. In exceptional circumstances, i.e. disability or medical needs, the bedroom requirement can be amended to accommodate special equipment, or other requirements. The discretion can only be used if special circumstances exist. Mr. Owens said that when a property becomes available for shortlisting, a number of factors are examined e.g. interest in the area, qualification for house type and category of need. Since 2017 a quantity of properties can be reserved for allocation to applicants who are on the waiting list 11 years or more, and this has resulted in a significant reduction for this category of applicants. Cllr. Byrne stated that applicants waiting the longest on the list should be catered for as a priority, as it is difficult to defend this length of time on the waiting list. He asked if this category could be moved up the priority list. Mr. Owens said that Section 4.1 of the Scheme deals with the reservation of properties for applicants who are longest on the list, rather than higher category with lesser time on the list. This category cannot be moved up the priority list based on legal advice received on the structure of the Scheme.

Cllr. McClearn said that there are always unintended consequences. Applicants in employment are not as transient as applicants in receipt of social welfare, who are in a position to move to other parts of the County to avail of social housing. When houses are allocated to tenants with no local connection to the area, it creates bad feeling in the locality. Mr. Owen informed the meeting that applicants must show a connection to the local area to make a housing application, but they can select any area of the County for their social housing. We also have a shared list with Galway County Council. Cllr. McClearn noted that the income limit for eligibility for social housing was far higher in the City, and it should be the same for both City and County. Mr. Owens confirmed that the Minister selects the Bands for the Councils for income eligibility. If applicants apply to the City, they may not be able to opt for a County location if their income limit exceeds the threshold for Galway County Council. Cllr. McClearn noted that it highlighted a number of issues which could be examined by the Committee.

In reply to issues raised by Ms. McGrath, Mr. Owens confirmed that individuals can apply separately or combine with others. If they combine with other individuals they will be offered a single tenancy. There is no facility for multiple tenancies of a single property. In relation to applicants under the disability category who may have failed to reply to correspondence, Mr.

Owens stated that there was an appeals mechanism in place. The applicant can appeal to the Appeals Officer, and some applications have been reinstated as a result. Credit on the list can only be awarded from the date of receipt of application.

Cllr. Byrne raised the matter of succession of tenancy, and said it was a very sensitive issue. He queried if the family could be afforded an opportunity to purchase the house. Mr. Owens replied that succession to a tenancy is laid out in Regulations, and therefore Galway County Council has no discretion in these cases. The consent of the Minister is required to any changes to the Scheme, to ensure that it meets the requirements of the Housing Acts and Regulations.

Cllr. Broderick raised the issue of existing tenants in Council properties who are now exceeding the income limit thresholds. Mr. Owens stated that it was national policy and tenants remain eligible for social housing and are not subject to a recheck of income. Cllr. Broderick asked about the current position in relation to the O’Cualainn project. Mr. Owens confirmed that a site for a pilot project had been identified in Ballinasloe, but an Affordable Scheme was still awaited. The site is zoned and serviced. An outline proposal has been submitted by the developer and is currently being reviewed by the Planning Section. The viability of the scheme in the current climate will have to be examined.

Cllr. Charity stated that further time was required to examine the proposed amended allocation Scheme. Cllr. Byrne suggested that the Members at the Plenary meeting would be invited to submit any points for consideration within two weeks, and that the matter would be reconsidered by the SPC Committee. Cllr. Mannion said that the issue needed to be dealt with urgently. Cllr. Byrne stated that following review of the document by the SPC Committee, it would be brought before the June meeting of the Plenary Council. Ms. Brann stated that the existing Scheme was already approved by the full Council in 2017 and the matter today before the SPC was only in relation to the proposed changes which would be to the benefit to applicants and would facilitate more applicants being housed. Mr. Scully said that he agreed totally with the proposed changes to the Scheme. Cllr. Charity noted that there may be other amendments that the Plenary Council may wish to make. Mr. Owens stated that the proposed changes were as a result of discussions with Councillors, and the previous SPC Committee. It was agreed that the members of the Plenary Council would be invited to submit comments on the Scheme. The matter would be reconsidered by the SPC Committee, with a view to placing it on the Agenda for the June meeting of Plenary Council.

6. Schedule of Housing SPC Meetings

It was agreed that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on Wednesday, 10th June 2020 at 10.00a.m. Mr. Owens advised the meeting that there will be a new Director in place in the Housing Department at that time. Cllr. Byrne wished Mr Owens well in his new post and thanked him for his knowledge commitment and dedication as a Director in the Housing Unit.

7. Any Other Business

No items discussed

This concluded the business of the meeting.