

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE NA GAILLIMHE

Minutes of Housing, Culture and Recreation SPC Meeting held in the Centrepoint Boardroom, Galway County Council Offices, Centrepoint, Liosban Business Park, Tuam Road, Galway, Wednesday, 20th April 2016, at 11.00a.m.

I Láthair:-

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

Oifigigh: Mr. P. Gavican, D.O.S
Ms. J. Brann, S.E.O. Housing
Mr. G. Scully, S.E.O Housing Corporate & Emergency Services
Mr. M. Sheil, S.E.E. Housing
Ms. M. Jordan, A.O. Housing
Mr. T. Doherty, E.E. Housing
Ms. J. Gibbons, S.O. Housing
Ms. G. Byrne, S.O. Housing
Ms. M. Flaherty, C.O. Housing

Apologies were received and noted from Ms. Eimear Dolan and Mr Padraic Maher.

1. Minutes of Meeting held on 2nd February, 2016 at 11.00am

The minutes of the meeting held on 2nd February 2016 were adopted on the proposal of Cllr. Fahy, seconded by Cllr. Burke.

Matters Arising

None

2. Progress on Social Housing Strategy

Ms. Brann gave an update on the Social Housing Strategy, its progress to date and meeting targets set for the period 2015-2017. She advised that the target of 144 units over the 3 year period will be met and that there is active engagement on 19 Part V units to get them over the line. Ms. Brann advised that in relation to the acquisitions programme a hold had previously been put on purchases, however, that has now been lifted by the Department and the green light has been given to forge ahead. On foot of this the council is actively scouting areas with the highest housing need per the housing waiting list. She explained that it is a very challenging process with a lot of obstacles i.e. small pool of properties, competition from 1st time buyers to name a few.

Ms. Brann advised that under the area of Voluntary / Capital Assistance Scheme there will potentially be 74 units over the 3 years within various areas throughout the County, and currently actively looking in the Oranmore area. In the area of Voids, Ms. Brann advised that approval has been given for Gilmartin Road and that the scheme design is currently being progressed.

Mr. Doherty gave an overview of Construction. He advised that there are 5 Schemes in working progress, Weir Road, Tuam - 31 units going to Part 8 in the next number of weeks, Gilmartin Road - 32 units, Garbally Drive - 10 units underway and due to go to Part 8 shortly, Esker Fields - 2 units to be adapted and 5 Rurals – 2 at Tender stage, 3 at Design stage.

Ms. Brann advised that the targets set under Capital are more achievable opposed to the targets under SCHEP which are more daunting, giving the example of RAS where lies the difficulty in sourcing new properties. She re-iterated the importance of engagement with the AHB's and the potential for delivery through the "off balance sheet" mechanism.

Mr. Gavican said from a recent meeting of the CCMA, Capital is where things are at and that construction is slower than the Department would like it to be. He advised that the Weir Road project submitted November 2015, only received its letter of approval mid-April 2016, the delay being only 1 person in the Department designated to checking and processing. He stressed the importance of working with the Department to speed up and streamline the process to get it moving quicker. Mr. Gavican advised that the pressure is on acquisitions again with 12-18 months traction and with the pot running out this put the push on construction. He advised that within the area of delivery, any derelict properties within the Local Authorities remit can be brought back into use in places of need and funding will be made available, however this will only be in areas of high demand. In relation to HAP, Mr. Gavican advised that there has been a 35 % take-up, 87 transferred however problems are encountered with finding properties and being within the set Cap.

3. Update on HAP

As a follow on from the previous SPC meeting where a presentation was given outlining this new form of Social Housing Support, Ms. Byrne gave an update on the progress to date with its implementation, target groups, transfer statistics, rent caps comparisons, operational issues, transfers between City/County areas and the promotion of HAP.

Ms. Byrne advised that in relation to new Social Housing Applicants, approximately 50 applications for housing support are received per month and 250 HAP packs have been issued to date. 1600 Long Term Rent Supplement Recipients will be transferred to HAP on a phased and agreed basis with the DSP. She advised that a number of factors are impacting greatly on transfer statistics in particular City Council transfers given that there are increasing numbers coming over from the City due to the critical supply issues within the City environs. All files have to be processed/approved under the County's eligibility criteria which is leading to a backlog with clients going into arrears with the landlords before joining HAP.

Another factor Ms. Byrne advised of being RAS clients issued with notices to quit within the City Council areas presenting as homeless and seeking to transfer to properties in the County. She explained how Rent Supplement transfers within the City will trigger an

increase in numbers coming under the County's remit as landlords are seeking rent increases that are way above HAP Caps, an example given, 3 beds ranging from €1200-€1500 per month in the City, the HAP cap for a couple with 2 children is €725, requiring top ups to the landlord. Ms. Byrne advised that both Galway County and City Council are awaiting a circular from the Department with further guidance on City and County HAP transfers. As regards Homeless Cases, Ms. Byrne advised that there are increasing numbers presenting to the Housing Unit that require priority status otherwise they may lose their property as landlords will not hold onto properties without a deposit. She said that the Department of Social Protection will on a case by case basis assist clients with their deposit but they must first be approved by HAP.

Ms. Byrne advised that the targets set up to April 2016 have been achieved and outlined the HAP statistics to date, 87 transfers, 246 HAP packs issued, 35% take up of the HAP scheme, 70% of tenancies are at existing addresses and 30% at new.

Ms. Byrne said that many operational issues have come to light on foot of the implementation of HAP. She explained that rent caps are a significant challenge particularly in high rental demand areas and under the HAP Regulations 2016 Galway County Council may agree to exceed the maximum HAP rent limits prescribed for its area by not more than 20% where it is deemed justified. She explained that there is approximately 98% failure rate to date on incomplete application forms. Not only is there 1600 rent supplement recipients that need to be transferred throughout the County, over 1200 require updated housing needs assessments. Ms. Byrne explained that transfers between Galway County and City Council are not straightforward, the length of time that one will be recognised to have been on the waiting list is more complex, using the example of someone on the County Council waiting list, if one selects an area of choice with the City Council, e.g Galway City West, 9 months ago, then it is only that 9 months that will transfer and vice versa if moving from the City Council's housing waiting list to Galway County. This, along with two differential rent schemes in operation and the variation in income threshold qualifications is proving challenging.

Ms. Byrne advised that to date there has been promotional sessions with the Citizens Information and cope. A one day information workshop is being planned with Galway City Council for all interested parties/advocacy groups involved with housing supports. A briefing session/seminar is taking place in the Ardilaun Hotel on June 24th 2016. There have been a number of local information sessions targeting landlords throughout the County and there will possibly be an interview with Keith Finnegan on local radio to raise media awareness.

Cllr. McHugh asked what the max rent is in Galway County Council and Galway City Council. Ms. Byrne advised that it is €84 in Galway County and €180 in Galway City. Cllr. Fahy queried the criteria of HAP and if it is based on basis income or net. Ms. Byrne clarified that it is net income and explained that there are difficulties with applicants not declaring maintenance payments which is factored for rent calculation purposes.

4. Housing Event (Title and Plan)

As a follow on from the last SPC meeting and the suggestion of holding a Housing Event, Ms. McElmeel gave an update on the current position. She explained that 2 meetings have been held by the sub-committee and preliminary discussions have taken place with Galway City Council on their involvement and taking a partnership approach for the event. She advised it would be a half day event, with 6 speakers incorporating the most important stakeholders followed by group/panel discussions. The target market will be all sectors from Housing/Planning of both Galway County and City Council on housing provision, Economists on private demand projections, AHBs on novel delivery models, CIF, ICSH, Irish Water, Nama to name a few. Ms. McElmeel stressed the importance of such an event in getting as much information out to the public as possible in relation to policy, economic setting and vision, along with delivery barriers, needs and supply. And in turn also getting as much information/feedback back to work on going forwards.

Mr. Gavican said he had spoken to Tom Parlon, CIF, who is extremely interested in the event. He said that Galway County Council is unique in that it sees both sides of the market along with prices increasing in selling and buying, with the not to distance future selling being on a par with building costs. Mr. Gavican stressed the importance of the Housing event in engaging with the private sector to give them a picture of our own Housing situation, that being the construction of our own units, procurement difficulties. He said one of the greatest difficulties is the Local Authority relying on the Part V provision with developers and that the private sector needs to get moving. Cllr. Hynes queried the current status of the Part V. Mr. Gavican explained that the local authority is currently focusing on existing developments with Part V agreements in place whereby there are a number to come to fruition. From there new developments and new Part Vs will be looked at. Cllr. Hynes queried if Galway County Council own land within the Loughrea Electoral Area that would be developed for Social Housing. Mr. Gavican explained that any lands serviced and deemed buildable within Galway County Council's remit have been forwarded to the Department, they have the ultimate decision and release the lands as they deem necessary. Cllr. Hynes acknowledged that the Council are doing their best throughout the County on acquiring sites.

Cllr. McHugh thanked Ms. McElmeel for the update on the Housing Event. He also stressed the importance of holding such an event to engage with the Private sector in order to produce houses to increase supply. Mr. Gavican advised the increase in prices is very evident in the Athenry area and other areas near to the City, however, further out the prices are weaker. He explained that for the event it would be important to have a case type/cost of house and possible solutions and that a Quantity Surveyors perspective will be of upmost importance.

5. Update on Tenant Purchase Scheme

Ms. Jordan advised that the Tenant Purchase Scheme application form and pack are now available from the Housing Department and will be available on the website in the coming weeks. 142 forms were issued on foot of enquiries received to which 25 were returned, 4 at valuation stage, 9 ineligible due to their income of €15,000 solely Social Welfare without any other income. This will be an issue in a lot of purchases. Ms. Jordan advised that certain houses may not be sold i.e. Part Vs'. In relation to mortgages, she advised that a

number have indicated that they will be looking to Galway County Council as opposed to private institutions for finance.

Cllr. McHugh income threshold of €15,000 and if a gifting of monies would suffice. Ms. Jordan advised the monies have to be from employment and not savings.

6. Housing Policy and Accommodating Choice Based Letting (CBL)

Ms. Jordan circulated the draft allocation scheme which sets out priorities in relation to allocating houses which has been updated and also the inclusion of Choice Based Letting in the policy. She explained that the categories from the previous allocation scheme have not changed and that the priority category of Homeless remains top priority. Ms. Jordan advised that the policy has firmed up on the successions of tenancies i.e. if the tenant passes away who gets the house. She said this will be dealt with on a case by case basis.

Mr. Scully circulated details on Choice Based Letting, a method being introduced as part of the Social Housing Strategy 2020 that can be used for the allocation of social housing whereby a tenant can express their interest in renting a suitable property in their preferred area. The purpose of its introduction is to shorten the length of time it takes to get some of the more difficult houses back into the rented stock. At present when vacancies arise in certain areas the allocations process can sometimes prove lengthy.

Mr. Scully explained that the scheme only applies to dwellings which have been specifically designated by Galway County Council for CBL. An advertisement will be placed on Galway County Council's website and displayed in County Hall, Area Offices, and Libraries. Households that wish to be considered in the allocation of a designated dwelling must, within a specified timeframe, apply to Galway County Council by submitting their interest via the online CBL system along with supporting documentation specified in the notice, an example of Cork County Council's online system was provided. The applicants will then be assessed under the Social Housing allocation policy. Mr. Scully advised that where a household refuses a reasonable offer of an allocation of a CBL dwelling, that household shall not, for a period of one year commencing on the date of refusal, be entitled to make a further application under CBL for the allocation of a bid dwelling.

The Housing Allocation Scheme to include Choice Based Letting was proposed by Cllr. Fahy, seconded by Cllr. Noone.

8. Any Other Business

It was agreed that the next meeting will take place on Thursday, 16th June 2016, at 11.00am.

This concluded the business of the meeting.