

**COMHAIRLE CATHRACH AGUS CONTAE PHORT LÁIRGE
WATERFORD CITY AND COUNTY COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 25th FEBRUARY, 2020 IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER,
CITY HALL, THE MALL, WATERFORD.**

PRESENT

Cllr. John Pratt (Mayor)	Cllr. John Hearne
Cllr. Donal Barry	Cllr. Joe Kelly
Cllr. Liam Brazil	Cllr. Eddie Mulligan
Cllr. Breda Brennan	Cllr. Jason Murphy
Cllr. Declan Clune	Cllr. Pat Nugent
Cllr. Joe Conway	Cllr. John O'Leary
Cllr. Tom Cronin	Cllr. Lola O'Sullivan
Cllr. John Cummins	Cllr. Thomas Phelan
Cllr. Davy Daniels	Cllr. Eamon Quinlan
Cllr. Declan Doocey	Cllr. Mary Roche
Cllr. Conor D. McGuinness	Cllr. Seamus Ryan
Cllr. Pat Fitzgerald	Cllr. Laura Swift
Cllr. Damien Geoghegan	Cllr. James Tobin
Cllr. Jim Griffin	Cllr. Adam Wyse

Apologies

Cllr. Barron, Cllr. S. Power, Cllr. J. Power, Cllr. O'Donnell.

Officials in Attendance

Mr. M. Walsh, Chief Executive
 Mr. I. Grimes, Director of Services, Housing, Community & Emergency Services
 Mr. F. Galvin, Director of Services, Roads, Water & Environment
 Mr. K. Kehoe, Director of Services, Corporate, Culture, HR & IS
 Mr. B. Pollard, Head of Finance
 Ms. H. Dunphy, Meetings Administrator
 Ms. A. Maher, Corporate Dept.

1. Casual Vacancy

H. Dunphy, Meetings Administrator confirmed that following the General Elections held on the 8th February 2020 there were two resulting vacancies on Waterford City and County Council. As Matt Shanahan was an Independent councillor and under the provisions of the Local Government Act, 2001 and section 69 of the Plenary Standing Orders the nominee submitted in writing by Matt Shanahan was Mary Roche.

It was proposed by Cllr. Conway, seconded by Cllr. Kelly and unanimously agreed that Mary Roche be appointed to fill the vacancy on Waterford City & County Council.

The Mayor then asked Mary Roche to take her seat on the Council.

Cllr. Mary Roche thanked her proposer and seconder, stating that she is delighted to be back on the Council and hopes to make a valuable contribution over the coming years.

Due the election of Cllr. Marc Ó Cathasaigh to Dáil Éireann and as Marc Ó Cathasaigh was a member a registered party, namely the Green Party and under the provisions of the Local Government Act 2001, the political party has nomination rights to the casual vacancy. Following an internal selection process Laura Swift was selected to replace Marc Ó Cathasaigh. Proposed by Cllr. John Pratt, Mayor, seconded by Cllr. Kelly and agreed by all.

The Mayor then asked Laura Swift to take her seat on the Council.

Cllr. Laura Swift thanked her proposer and seconder, her family and friends, and also Grace O'Sullivan, MEP and Green Party colleague who attended the meeting. Since June 2019 Grace O'Sullivan has been elected as MEP, Marc Ó Cathasaigh as TD and two seats on the council outlining the focus on the environment by the electorate.

Congratulations extended to the two new members of the council by all present.

2. Audit Report

B. Pollard, HoF outlined the details of the audit report, an overview of the AFS, an estimation of collection figures and actions to improve the collection rates for 2020. He also provided an overview in relation to rates, loans and rent collection.

M. Walsh, CE outlined that the council needs to make changes and look at a new approach to collections. The policy of not carrying out repairs in relation to houses that are in rent arrears is working and payment plans are being entered into. The issue of loans is more challenging however the current Rebuilding Ireland loans have better credit checks and controls in place, the Mortgage to Rent scheme is the preferred approach of the council. He outlined that there is sufficient bad debt provision and collections are being improved upon, the targets being set by finance are realistic but will require significant work in order to achieve them.

Cllr. Cummins asked about the judgement mortgage proposal and whether this will affect the collection figure.

Cllr. Clune stated that a heading by heading breakdown was looked for.

Cllr. Conway enquired as to the number of convictions for non-payment of rent were secured and the number of evictions carried out in the last 5 years.

Cllr. Kelly queried the collection rate of 78% in comparison to other Local Authorities and how tenants end up with sizeable arrears asking how these tenants are being dealt with. He noted that the collection of arrears would cover the deficit.

Cllr. Geoghegan requested presentation to be circulated and for quarterly updates to be issued.

Cllr. Phelan noted that the issue of the Irish Water deficit and rates collection needs to be addressed, commenting that a distressed borrower's policy is required.

I.Grimes, DoS confirmed that no evictions have been secured in the last five years, noting that court proceedings are slow and very costly. He outlined that there are currently seven cases being pursued in court and there is a focus on having tenants enter into payment plans. In 2019 the Council withdrew all housing maintenance from anyone in arrears and this is having an effect on payments.

M. Walsh, CE noted that the rate of collection varies within local authorities stating that we need to have systems that are reasonable and fair. Eviction is a possibility but need to then balance the knock on effect to our homeless service, outlining that there is a certain cohort of tenants that will always have a difficulty in paying. There is a need to be more aggressive with collections and this is being looked at.

Cllr. Ryan took over as Deputy Mayor for the remainder of the meeting.

Cllr. Daniels enquired if staff reductions from the amalgamation have resulted in reduced staffing for collections. He queried if the sale of land at Mount Congreve has been received and what the funding was to be used for.

Cllr. Mulligan queried how the council will bear the additional costs for urban renewal within the capital account, outlined issues with poor quality of work in Apple Market, requested copy of review of machinery yard, requested list of companies not listed in AFS and asked when Mount Congreve will be sustainable. He sought clarification on the allocation of €40,000 to a musical festival.

Cllr. Quinlan noticed that the comment "true and fair view" is not there by the Auditor which he thought was unusual.

B. Pollard, HoF will clarify wording with the auditor and see if it is required.

M. Walsh, CE confirmed that the auditor has signed off on the accounts and he is happy with the terminology used. Advance funding was given to the Day Tripper music event to encourage this type of activity for the area, the event ran at a loss so recoupment is unlikely. Funding has been received for Mount Congreve and will improve the facility and offering, the sale of land was separate to the Mount Congreve estate and not part of the trust. He noted that staffing is balanced between areas of pressure in the organisation, currently additional staff reallocated to finance to work on collections and stated that hopes to retain current staff levels.

Cllr. Clune asked about the preparation of accounts and if the deadline given is still realistic. He questioned how the accounts in arrears were not addressed sooner as it poses a risk to the cash flow of the council. It is important that items in the budget that require councillor approval are highlighted in adequate time.

M. Walsh, CE confirmed that the loans amount owed is high but this is in context of not putting anyone out of their home. He assured members that engagement has happened with customers in arrears and will continue with the view of collection of what is owed.

Cllr. Cummins enquired how many of overdue rent cases have been dealt with by the Mortgage to Rent (MTR) scheme.

B. Pollard, HoF explained that they have done MTR restructuring and are assessing the risk with customers.

Cllr. Mulligan asked for details on the review undertaken in relation to the Urban Renewal scheme, in particular the projects that had issues in relation to the quality of their finish and can retention money be used to address the problems.

M. Quinn, DoS noted that there was 10% retention in relation to public realm works and issues are been addressed.

Cllr. Phelan stated that the report was dated in October of last year and asked if it he format in which it is presented is reviewed and addressed the details in the questions being raised.

M. Walsh, CE confirmed that he will look at presenting the information differently and will revert to the audit committee. He is happy to facilitate additional meetings in the run up to the next audit report.

Cllr. Swift enquired in relation to the processes available to the council for collections and suggested that mediation is considered as an option to get someone to engage rather than the formality of the courts.

B. Pollard, Hof confirmed that the courts are the last option and a lot of engagement is carried out before formal proceedings are instigated.

Cllr. Barry noted that there is a lot of staff involved in procurement and enquired if it is planned to streamline this process, enquired if reviews are occurring in the machinery yard on basis of recommendations previously made. He enquired if the sanction of no service to tenants who don't pay their rent can be applied to those who don't pay rates.

M. Walsh, CE stated that the same sanction is not available for those that don't pay rates noting what service could be withheld

K. Kehoe, DoS confirmed that staff and processes have been looked at in relation to procurement outlining that the preferred option is that it is carried out at each section level as they are familiar with the requirements.

Cllr. Mulligan mentioned the fixed assets and a senior management review of the yard and asked can this be circulated.

F. Galvin, DoS confirmed that continuous reviews are carried out in the machinery yard, some elements of the service have been re-tendered and informed members that Irish Water have introduced their own fleet.

Cllr. Griffin requested a briefing at a future date in relation to the other structures that work closely with the council such as the Area Partnership.

Meeting concluded.

Signed: _____
Mayor

Dated: _____