

## **Derry City and Strabane District Council**

### **Open Minutes of the Meeting of the Governance and Strategic Planning Committee held Remotely on Tuesday 3 November 2020 at 4.00 pm**

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**Present:- Alderman Guy (in the Chair), Aldermen Bresland, McClintock and McCready, Councillors J Boyle, M Boyle, Fleming, Cooper, Donnelly, Duffy, Gallagher, McKeever, Mooney and Reilly.**

**Non-Members of Committee – Councillors Durkan, Farrell, Ferguson, Logue and McCann.**

**In Attendance:- Chief Executive (Mr J Kelpie), Lead Finance Officer (Mr A Dallas), Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer (Ms E Cavanagh), Head of Human Resources (Mrs P Donnelly), Strategic Business Manager (Mrs R Craig), Senior Economist (Mr M Gallagher) and Committee Services Assistant (Ms N Meehan).**

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#### **GSP154/20 Notice and Summons for Meeting**

The Chief Executive read the Notice and Summons for the Meeting.

#### **GSP155/20 Member Attendance and Apologies**

The Chief Executive took the roll call and no apologies were recorded.

#### **GSP156/20 Broadcasting Statement**

The Chairperson read the Broadcasting Statement for the Meeting.

#### **GSP157/20 Declarations of Members' Interests**

The following Declarations of Interests were recorded:

Item 5:- To receive representatives from Northern Ireland Housing Executive to present the Housing Investment Plan – Annual Update 2020 – Councillor Duffy.

#### **Open for Decision**

**GSP158/20 To Receive Representatives from NIHE to present the Housing Investment Plan – Annual Update 2020**

The Committee received Mr C Bailie, Chief Executive, Mr E Doherty, Area Manager, Mr P Isherwood, Director of Asset Management and Mr J Cassidy, Senior Planner NIHE who presented the Housing Investment Plan – Annual Update 2020, a copy of which had previously been circulated.

Members thanked Mr Bailie for his presentation.

**GSP159/20 To Receive Representatives from NIHE to deliver a Presentation on Housing Stock Transfers and Major Adaptations Plan**

The Committee received Mr A Kennedy, Assistant Director, Asset Strategy who delivered a presentation on Housing Stock Transfers: a copy of which had previously been circulated.

The Committee then received Ms L Vincent, Assistant Director, Project Delivery, Asset Strategy who gave a power-point presentation on the Major Adaptations Plan which addressed the following:

**Historical Overview**

**In-House Pilot Project**

Pilot Project Benefits  
Major Adaptations Plan Limitations  
North Regional Issues

**Insite Dashboard**

**Derry/Strabane Live Project**

**Total Projects Within the**

**Derry/Strabane OT Referrals**

Members thanked the Chief Executive and his team for their comprehensive presentations which were most informative.

Councillor Logue welcomed the reports received and referred to the announcement earlier that day by the Minister for Communities

regarding the future role of the Housing Executive. She said this announcement reflected Sinn Fein's commitment towards the future sustainability of the Housing Executive allowing the organisation to borrow and build and ensure it became stronger in the future. She welcomed the announcement which she anticipated would change and improve many of the Housing Executive's current strategies. She referred to discussions which had taken place between representatives of her Party and Ms Vincent the previous year, regarding concerns at the time involved in the provision and installation of disabled adaptations to properties in the City. Whilst acknowledging the reasons pertaining to the length of time involved she felt it was important to welcome the new tool developed in-house and the dashboard together with more common sense approaches being adopted in an effort to having adaptations carried out in a timely manner. She looked forward to this backlog being addressed in the near future.

In regards to the issue of stock transfer, Councillor Logue said she felt the Assets Management Strategy would now be delayed given the Minister's announcement earlier that day.

In regards to the Housing Investment Plan, Councillor Logue stated that Sinn Fein welcomed the development of an Accessible Housing Register which would help people to navigate suitable housing solutions. She suggested that the Housing Executive instruct their Patch Managers to liaise with tenants in properties where disabled adaptations had already been carried out, in order to ascertain current need. Many of those for whom the adaptations had originally been installed had either passed away or were in residential housing. She referred to the fact that if existing tenants were to move, these properties would prove considerable assets and could potentially assist in addressing waiting lists for disabled adaptations to properties. She referred to the possibility of developing a register in respect of those applicants with physical disabilities and specific requirements. This, she hoped would ensure, that on allocation a property was equipped with the specific needs of the tenants.

Councillor Logue acknowledged and welcomed the positive working relationship which existed between Council and the local Housing Executive branch and the partnership working which had proved most successful. She referred to the difficulties which had been experienced during Covid-19 and commended local staff on their hard work and commitment during these particularly difficult circumstances.

Councillor Reilly welcomed the representatives from the Housing Executive and thanked them for their detailed and engaging presentations to Committee. He said these had proved timely given the Minister's announcement earlier that day in regards to the Housing Executive and the impact on local communities. He welcomed the Minister's announcement and emphasised that this was an aspiration shared and supported by his Party, the success of which would be measured in terms of delivery. He also welcomed the fact that a Minister was now in place to lead this aspiration and deliver the changes needed in regards to housing in this Council area both rural and urban. He acknowledged the high levels of need throughout the entire Council area where there was a huge demand for social housing. He sought an update in respect of the Waterside Triangle, pointing out that this was an area which had been in much need of improvement for some considerable time and in respect of which improvement works had been assured. However, these necessary works had faced continuous delays due to the lack of a functioning Executive.

Councillor Reilly welcomed the work being carried out in regards to the Major Adaptation Plan which involved a number of government departments. He referred to delays in regards to the provision of major adaptation works and the impact on those with a disability. He referred to the need for an urgent overhaul of the current housing points system, acknowledging discussions which had taken place regarding intimidation points and how these could be better interrogated. He expressed concern at the extended time being spent by those people in temporary accommodation and referred to the need for a change in the current points/allocation system which would help to address this problem. He acknowledged, however, that a part of these major changes would be the borrowing powers given to the Housing Executive. He felt that as well as investing in stock it would also be necessary for the Housing Executive to consider how to use its own resources in regards to its new build programme.

Councillor Gallagher referred to the ongoing social housing stress and increasing waiting lists which existed in this Council area and the lack of investment by successive governments to address this problem. He felt the Housing Executive was successful in regards to providing accommodation and offering support to tenants. He commended the commitment shown by local Housing Executive officials in terms of support and engagement with tenants. He said the Housing Executive was one of the statutory bodies willing to engage at grass roots to

address, understand and ultimately identify solutions to the problems which existed.

Councillor Gallagher referred to the help and assistance provided to many local residents through the Covid Support Funding and the Resilience Plan at local level. He referred to the success in addressing issues regarding anti-social behaviour and bonfires within this Council area, which was greatly assisted by the Housing Executive. He enquired as to the current position in regards to refurbishment works at the block of flats at Lisnafin.

Councillor Gallagher expressed concern at the potential for privatisation in regards to the issue of Stock Transfers leading to the ultimate demise of the Housing Executive. He referred to the period during which stock transfers were taking place which coincided with an apparent centralisation of the Housing Executive and referred to the need for decentralisation in order for the Housing Executive to become more effective in its work. He said the Housing Executive worked most effectively at a local level.

He referred to the need for engagement between the Housing Executive and the Western Health Care Trust, and in particular Occupational Therapists, in regards to the carrying out of adaptation works. Networking was vital in order to bring together the many stakeholders involved to ensure that all those issues pertaining to adaptations for disabled persons were addressed.

Councillor M Boyle welcomed the presentations. She enquired as to proposals in respect of rural housing, acknowledging the need for green infrastructure. She stated that people living in the rural area believed they were being overlooked in regards to issues such as transport, housing, planning and the sustainability of rural communities. She enquired as to the Housing Executive's planning proposals for rural housing. She referred to the need for a community approach to development within rural communities. She referred to the importance of meeting the needs of those people living in the rural areas to sustain rural communities. She referred to the previous closure of businesses in the rural area due to the lack of housing stock and development. Such development was necessary to sustain the rural economy.

Councillor M Boyle referred to limited provision of temporary accommodation in the Strabane area. She referred to the current

waiting list for access to the support services in Strabane. Whilst acknowledging that temporary accommodation was available in Derry and elsewhere she enquired if there were plans to build more temporary accommodation in the Strabane area in the near future. She enquired as to the number of vacant properties throughout the Council district and referred to the need for works to be carried out to ensure that this stock was returned to Housing Executive ownership. She acknowledged the excellent work carried out by the Housing Executive in the Strabane area particularly during Covid. She also commended the Housing Adaptation Team in Derry on their hard work and efforts throughout this period.

Mr Bailie welcomed Members comments and recognised how valued and respected his colleagues were at a local level. He referred to the importance of local links, acknowledging that the Housing Executive had responsibility for Northern Ireland as a whole.

Mr Bailie acknowledged that the Housing Executive had not been meeting the targets in regards to rural housing in recent years and reassured Members that efforts were being made to ensure that targets were met this year.

Mr Kennedy advised that the Housing Executive had been working closely with the Department in regards to the extensive refurbishment scheme for the Waterside Triangle. He referred to the considerable costs involved in these works and to a number of issues which had been raised by the Department, which the Housing Executive was in the process of responding to. He advised that earlier that day he had responded to a number of queries submitted by the Department of Finance regarding the matter. He pointed out that given the size of the scheme and the costs involved and the financial limitations facing the Housing Executive, Department approval was required in order to progress the scheme. He reiterated that the Housing Executive were endeavouring to answer all of the queries presented by the Department satisfactorily in order that approval could be granted and the scheme progressed without further unnecessary delay.

Mr Cassidy referred to a major problem being experienced in regards to the availability and acquisition of land in terms of addressing rural housing need. He stated that under the current programme, thirty-four units of housing were programmed for the period 2020/2024. He stated that the Housing Executive was currently working on site investigation studies and were also working on a programme of rural

assessment tests in respect of certain areas. He advised that rural assessment tests had previously been carried out in Magheramason with one programmed to be carried out in Plumbridge. He suggested that Members submit areas in respect of which they would propose a rural assessment test being carried out.

Mr Doherty acknowledged the lack of temporary accommodation in the Strabane area and referred to internal discussions which were taking place regarding the challenges presented by Covid in regards to temporary accommodation. He referred to discussions which were ongoing with a developer in regards to the provision of temporary accommodation in Strabane. He referred to a scheme to develop twenty-one one-bed apartments for the purpose of specifically addressing temporary accommodation requirements in the Strabane area. It was anticipated that this scheme would be completed in early January.

In regards to vacant properties, Mr Doherty referred to restrictions placed on Patch Managers as a result of Covid which prevented on-site visits. He stated that all reports regarding vacant properties were thoroughly investigated. He stated that there were currently very few recorded vacant properties, however, close liaisons did take place with the Housing Executive's Fraud Department regarding this matter. He undertook to advise the said Member in regards to specific numbers of vacant properties in the Strabane area. He referred to the importance of this issue given the Housing Executive's need to maximise the use of its properties to address increasing waiting lists and demand for properties.

Councillor Duffy welcomed the very informative presentations and she thanked Mr Doherty and the local staff for their hard work and efforts. She referred to the excellent working relationship which existed between local staff and elected representatives. She stated that this was a momentous occasion in terms of the Minister's announcement in regards to the review of the Housing Executive. She said her Party had been striving for such a review for a considerable period of time. She welcomed the ring fencing of funding in respect of Derry and North Belfast and other areas. This had been dismissed by previous Ministers and had resulted in a reduction of housing stock in these area. She referred to ongoing discussions regarding homelessness. She stated that during Covid there had been a recognised increase in the number of people being provided with temporary accommodation particularly in the City centre in pop-up B&Bs. She expressed concern that these

were extremely vulnerable individuals with very high support needs which were not being met. They were not receiving the services they required and at times were being placed in extremely dangerous situations. She referred to the need for this issue to be resolved and acknowledged the work carried out by Mr Doherty in this regard. She referred to the support services which existed within the City in regards to floating support which she felt must be utilised but she also referred to the wider issues which needed to be addressed. She stated that dealing with homelessness was not merely a matter of providing accommodation it was also necessary to ensure that support was available for very vulnerable individuals to allow them to address their issues.

Councillor Duffy referred to the Supporting People Programme and its personal importance as someone employed in the homelessness sector. She referred to the continuous hard work carried out by frontline staff employed in this service, particularly during Covid, who had not received any recognition for their efforts either financially or otherwise. The members of staff struggled as inflation continued to rise whilst their earnings remained the same. She anticipated that this would also be addressed by the Minister as part of her fundamental review of the Housing Executive.

She welcomed plans to carry out a review of the current points system which was totally unfair, particularly for areas such as Derry, where the points required for housing allocation were much higher than in other areas. She referred to areas of high need and high deprivation such as Creggan, Ballyarnett and Shantallow and pointed out that it was vital that residents were given a chance to accumulate the necessary points to secure accommodation. She said it was a daily struggle for those concerned to accumulate the points required to be allocated accommodation in such areas. Without obtaining the necessary points these people would continue to live in bedsits, B&Bs and in overcrowded conditions and remain in housing stress indefinitely. She referred to a proposed 119 dwelling development for the Creggan area which was much needed, given the considerable number of points required in respect of housing allocation in this area. She referred to a number of potential difficulties in regards to the proposed development. She acknowledged that Council had a role in regards to the development and anticipated that it would do all in its power to ensure the progression of the proposed development.



Councillor Donnelly concurred with the previous speaker's comments in regards to the proposed housing development in Creggan. He also referred to the considerable number of points required in respect of housing allocation in this area. He stated that the Housing Executive presented an excellent model in regards to housing provision. He commended Mr Doherty and the local staff for the confidentiality and commitment shown by them in addressing the needs of their tenants and issues which existed in regards to housing need and homelessness. He referred to the Minister's announcement and said the Housing Executive had a background and an ethos in regards to human rights in terms of divorcing the issue of social housing from sectarian politics. He queried why such an announcement had taken so long and why it had been necessary to wait until the Housing Executive was almost at breaking point before presenting such a common sense proposal. He anticipated that the announcement would prove a positive step and would mark the end of the privatisation of the Housing Executive by stealth. He referred to the obvious need for additional social housing and the ultimate benefits to be derived from the development of additional housing in terms of creating employment, the payment of additional rent all of which could go back into and help the local economy. As an elected representative and a Housing Executive tenant he acknowledged the excellent work carried out by the Housing Executive on a daily basis. He referred to the overwhelming support for the Housing Executive in this City and District and to opposition against any future stock transfer. He said the Housing Executive must be defended and referred to the need for action to be taken to ensure that this was a properly funded organisation in going forward.

Councillor Mooney paid tribute to the work carried out by the Housing Executive. He concurred with the sentiments expressed by Councillors Duffy and Donnelly in regards to the current points system and the difficulty in terms of housing allocation in particular areas because of the current system.

Alderman McClintock welcomed the Minister's announcement regarding the review of the Housing Executive and looked forward to seeing the out-workings of this in the future. She said the Housing Executive was clearly held in high estimation by its tenants and referred to the positive relationship which existed between the Housing Executive and its tenants. She also commended local Housing Executive staff on their commitment. She welcomed the noticeable expanse of social housing on the Cityside but stated that unfortunately this was not apparent in the Waterside. She expressed concern that the

issues in regards to the Waterside Triangle would not be resolved in the near future, given the extent of the delays being experienced. She anticipated that a resolution to these problems would be identified. She also welcomed the Major Adaptation Plan and the fact that delays would be highlighted and addressed given the impact of this on people with a disability. She wished Mr Bailie well on his forthcoming retirement and thanked him for his commitment to Council as Chief Executive of the Housing Executive.

Mr Bailie welcomed Alderman McClintock's comments and those of Members in regards to the hard work and commitment of his staff. He acknowledged that providing accommodation did not address the homelessness issue but pointed out that during Covid a lot of emphasis was placed on getting people off the street. Whilst the original plan was to use hotel accommodation with hotel closures during lockdown the Housing Executive was under enormous pressure to find accommodation for homeless people. Whilst realising that ideally there would have been a support package, in some instances this could not be provided. He stated that steps were being taken to address the problem.

Mr Doherty pointed out that a number of meetings had taken place regarding the issue of homelessness. He concurred with Mr Bailie regarding the challenges presented by Covid in terms of finding accommodation. He stated that during the lockdown there was no movement in or out of temporary accommodation and no allocations by Housing Associations or the Housing Executive. He stated that the situation effectively came to a halt, however, homelessness continued with the problems and challenges which this presented. He said it was therefore necessary for the Housing Executive to consider alternative solutions and pointed out that twenty-four properties were removed from general demand in an effort to address this problem. He said he was fully aware that it was not merely a matter of providing accommodation and referred to the need for additional supported accommodation in the City to address the homelessness problem. He continued that against the backdrop of Covid, priorities changed but he continued to work to bring investment to the City which would allow the Housing Executive to provide not only the accommodation but also the support required to address the homelessness problem. He acknowledged the need to find solutions for those people presenting with problems such as mental health and addictions. He said he was working tirelessly to identify a solution to the problem and was currently drafting a pilot project which would influence a business case

to present to the Department. This would hopefully draw finance into the City to provide accommodation including the support mechanisms required to address the problem. Whilst this was still a work in progress, it was progressing.

Mr Bailie pointed out that every year additional funding was sought in respect of the Supporting People Programme, albeit unsuccessfully. He pointed out that this budget had been capped at £72.8m which was an achievement given the cuts which other budgets had been subjected to. He accepted that pay rates were low but pointed out that this was a matter for employers. He was shocked to learn that some employees who were unable to attend work due to having contacted Covid-19 were receiving Statutory Sick Pay. He also expressed concern that some providers who had complained that their funding was inadequate had been able to put monies aside to create substantial reserves. He acknowledged the importance of the Supporting People Programme and said the Housing Executive would continue to lobby for additional funding for this project.

Mr Bailie referred to discussions which were ongoing with Radius regarding the proposed housing development in Creggan. He was hopeful that this scheme could now proceed which would represent a significant contribution to social housing in the City. In regards to allocations he stated that the number of points required in any specific area was a reflection of the tensions between demand, need and supply. The fact that it was possible to be allocated a property for forty points in one area did not necessarily reflect an inconsistency but merely the availability of social housing and the level of demand.

Mr Doherty acknowledged the importance that housing represented for elected representatives. He stated that the demand for housing in the City was continuing to rise above the supply available which was an ongoing difficulty. He welcomed the Minister's announcement in terms of forward planning. He pointed out that the Housing Selection Scheme was the system for allocating social housing throughout Northern Ireland. He stated that the demand for housing in specific areas on the Westbank of the City was huge which ultimately increased the points required to secure a property in these area and created significant challenges for Housing Executive staff. He said staff continued to work closely with elected representatives in regards to individual constituent cases and would continue to do so given the high demand which existed. He referred to an apparent unwillingness on the Westbank for people to change their area of choice because of

past associations to an area where they would be likely to secure an allocation based on their points level. This restricted what the Housing Executive could do in terms of housing allocation and continued to increase the points required for these specific areas. He stated that the Housing Executive had secured its policies and procedures within the City in regards to intimidation and pointed out that the number of cases now coming forward had fallen. However, the problem had not been resolved and the Housing Executive would continue to address this and work with elected representatives in an effort to identify a solution to the problem.

Alderman Devenney concurred with the comments made by Alderman McClintock in regards to the Minister's announcement regarding Housing Executive borrowing and anticipated that this would go some way towards addressing housing need and housing stress within this Council area. He emphasised the importance of considering the types of dwellings required in planning future building. He commended Housing Executive staff on their hard work and efforts. He acknowledged the issues which existed in regards to the current points system and welcomed the Major Adaptation Plan. He expressed concern that a number of tenants in Stoney Falls in Donemana whose properties were undergoing adaptation works were without washing or cooking facilities for over four weeks. He considered this to be unacceptable and pointed out that similar schemes had been completed in one week.

Councillor McCann commended the Housing Executive on their hard work and commitment both locally and beyond. He referred to the fact that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was an historic institution and one which was cherished. The inception of the Housing Executive was regarded as a move away from the dominant provision of housing from small time local and often sectarian politics. He acknowledged the problems experienced by the Housing Executive over the years. He welcomed the Minister's announcement that the Housing Executive would be allowed to borrow to build which was not only relevant to the housing market but might address the current shortage of skilled tradesmen required to build houses. He said this represented a triumph against the privatisation of the Housing Executive and the selling of its stock. He referred to the numerous campaigns which took place to demand the return of borrowing rights to the Housing Executive to continue to build houses. He referred to the financial transaction capital and queried if this was involved in the Minister's

scheme. He expressed concern that financial transaction capital could only be accessed by a private entity and not a public entity.

Alderman Warke referred to a serious situation which had arisen in some areas of the City whereby assaults were being carried out by homeless persons who had been accommodated in B&Bs. He referred to the need for this problem to be addressed without delay as this problem was effectively creating “no go” areas in main routes into the City. Local residents were also being intimidated into leaving their homes because of this problem with anti-social behaviour and drugs which must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Councillor J Boyle concurred with the comments expressed by Councillor Duffy and Alderman Warke in regards to homelessness. He acknowledged the challenges and vulnerabilities of those persons involved and that the Housing Executive were working diligently to find solutions to the problem. He alluded to the fact that the vast majority of homeless people were not engaging in any form of anti-social behaviour. He referred to the need to find the appropriate support services to address the needs and challenges which many homeless people presented and this should be expedited without delay. He appreciated the excellent work being carried out by the Housing Executive amidst the additional challenges presented by Covid.

Councillor M Boyle acknowledged and commended the Strabane Housing Executive team on the work carried out by them during the recent flooding in Strabane. She thanked them for the diligence, care and support they had shown to the residents affected in Ballycolman Estate. She concurred with Councillor’s Gallagher’s comments in regards to the flats at Lisnafin. She also wished Mr Bailie well in his retirement and thanked him for the work he had carried out with the Minister and Sinn Fein in general.

Mr Bailie thanked Members for their comments. He agreed with the comments expressed by Alderman Devenney in regards to the four-week period to carry out adaptation works. He acknowledged the difficulties experienced by the residents concerned and undertook to investigate the details regarding this scheme. He said he understood that the capital could only be accessed by private organisations and was used very effectively in co-ownership which was often the only source of funding. He continued that some reclassification would be required through the Office of National Statistics to enable the Housing

Executive to borrow, otherwise any borrowing would score against the Northern Ireland block and would not be feasible.

He referred to earlier discussion regarding temporary accommodation. He did not consider that all anti-social behaviour was caused by homeless people. The Housing Executive did recognise that many of the people it gave assistance to did have a range of issues including behavioural issues, mental health and substance dependency/abuse. However, the Housing Executive did have a responsibility to find accommodation for these people. He said the Housing Executive were keen to develop a multi-agency approach and Housing First was a concept which had proved extremely successful in helping those people with more complex needs with well over 70-80% success rate in sustaining tenancies. However, the Housing Executive did require a wrap-around report. He referred to Mr Doherty's continuous efforts to identify new solutions and new models for this Council area. He reassured Members that the Strabane area had not been overlooked and acknowledged the housing issues which existed in that area.

Mr Doherty welcomed Members comments on issues of such significance which he said he was continuously raising internally. He anticipated that continuous efforts would be made to identify solutions for their tenants in this Council area and in regards to the issue of temporary accommodation for the homeless. He welcomed Members comments in regards to the work carried out by himself and staff in local offices in an effort of identify solutions to the problems which existed.

In response to a query from Councillor Gallagher regarding Lisnafin Flats, Mr Kennedy advised that a refurbishment scheme had been developed which would completely modernise the block of flats at Lisnafin. This would involve an element of reconfiguration together with an assisted technology project through which technology could be used to help the elderly and those with disabilities to lead more independent lives. The scheme would be presented to the Housing Executive's Board for approval at the end of November. He was currently in the process of preparing this proposal. If Board approval was forthcoming the proposal would be forwarded to the Department for Communities whose approval for the scheme was also required.

The Chairperson thanked the Housing Executive representatives for their presentations and wished Mr Bailie, Chief Executive well in his retirement.

Subsequently the Committee

- Recommended**
- (a) that Council write to the Minister for Communities requesting the end of the practice of Stock Transfer; and**
  - (b) that Council write to the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Communities urging the progression of the Waterside Triangle refurbishment scheme.**

Councillor Duffy pointed out that Sinn Fein MLA, Martina Anderson had met with the Housing Minister onsite at the Waterside Triangle in July, in an effort to progress these works. She advised that the Minister was currently preparing a business case for submission to the Minister for Finance. She stated that the Minister was aware of the urgency in regards to this matter and was progressing it accordingly at this time.

### **Chairperson's Business**

There was no Chairperson's Business.

### **GSP160/20 Confirmation of the Open Minutes of the Governance and Strategic Planning Committee held on Tuesday 6 October 2020**

The Open Minutes of the Governance and Strategic Planning Committee held on 6 October 2020 (GSP134/20-GSP151/20) were agreed and signed by the Chairperson.

### **Matters Arising**

#### **GSP161/20 Freeports (GSP140/20)**

Alderman McCready referred to discussion which had taken place on the above matter at the October Meeting of Committee and expressed concern that a report on the matter had not been presented to this Meeting.

The Chief Executive explained that Minute GSP140/20 indicated that a report on the matter would be presented to a future Meeting of Committee. He stated that Officers were currently working with

colleagues in the Business and Culture Directorate in Belfast City Council together with other Councils and the Port and Harbour Commissioners in order to bring forward a potential joint proposition. A report updating Members would be submitted to a future Meeting of Committee. He referred to an issue which was discussed at the October Council Meeting that representatives from the Port and Harbour Commissioners be invited to address a future Meeting of Committee on the matter. He advised that the matter was being progressed although this may take some time to bring together as it was not a traditional Free-port type proposal but something which might be more bespoke to the needs of this Council area. It was hoped that an update on the matter would be presented to the December or January Meeting of Committee.

Alderman McCready referred to a consultation which had taken place which stakeholders had replied to. He queried as to the content of Council's response to the consultation process.

The Chief Executive said he understood The Funding Manager had prepared a submission to the consultation process and undertook to make this available to the said Member.

### **GSP162/20 Strategic Capital Projects Funding Strategy**

The Lead Finance Officer presented the above report, a copy of which had previously been circulated. He advised that the purpose of the report was for Members to consider the emerging funding strategy for Council's strategic capital projects including the redevelopment proposals for Templemore Sports Complex and Leisure Centre provision for Strabane following on from the Council Notice of Motion in May 2020.

Members commended the Lead Finance Officer on his comprehensive report.

Councillor Cooper welcomed the report and the proposals outlined in regards to capital projects particularly given the impact of Covid and the bleak financial position facing Council a few months previously. However, the intervention of central government, the Department of Finance, Department for Communities and others had shielded Council from the severity of those potential financial challenges. This, together with the prudent approach adopted over a number of years in terms of ring-fencing savings, meant Council could plan for the future, even in



the midst of such a crisis and provide hope and optimism for people in going forward both in terms of local projects and more strategic projects such as the replacement of Templemore Sports Complex and the Riversdale Leisure Centre. Both of these projects were much needed for local communities and were long overdue. He praised the Lead Finance Officer and his team on the approach taken by them and on their achievements in bringing this report forward. He also referred to negotiations regarding City of Derry Airport, the outcome of which he anticipated would enable Council's financial contribution to the upkeep of the Airport to be reduced significantly. He referred to the successful outcome of the VATs case taken recently pending an appeal by HMRC which he hoped would not transpire. This would provide Council with even more scope around its finances in going forward.

The Chief Executive pointed out that this was an extremely complicated financial process and stated that a number of other organisations had decided to halt their strategic projects until a time when the way forward was more secure. This was not the choice Council had taken and was trying to plan its strategic future whilst managing the ongoing Covid crisis. He said it was a major challenge to pull together the finances required for these projects and Council did need a successful outcome to the ongoing discussions regarding the Airport to provide much needed finances hopefully in the coming year. He referred to the fact that there were other sources of financing including savings but of course Council also had to meet a short term savings target which further compounded the situation. He stated that clearly part of the strategy was rates income and none of this could be fully agreed upon until this year's rates estimates process had concluded. Council was therefore suggesting an incremental approach to the process and an update report in due course. He stated that when the outcome of the negotiations regarding the Airport became apparent and when Council was in a position to determine the extent of its savings targets and its position in regards to the overall rates process, it was hoped more solid assurances could be given regarding the projects. However, the fact that these were being discussed and not halted and Council was trying to identify a solution was very positive.

Councillor M Boyle felt it was vital that Templemore Sports Complex and the Riversdale Leisure Centre both of which were of equal importance, were progressed simultaneously. She said it was crucial to the new leisure build in respect of Strabane that the Riversdale Project was developed alongside the Templemore Sports Complex in relation to internal and external funding allocations and that the relevant

Officers within Council were mandated to take both projects forward on that basis. She stated that there was a huge expectation in Strabane in regards to the development of the leisure centre.

The Chief Executive assured that both projects would be developed simultaneously, pointing out that the Strabane project was strategically more important than the Templemore project. He stated that due to its location Council had been able to lever all of the City Deal investment into the site. It had also used Council's anchor project on the Canal Basin site as the impetus for gathering health and education around this project. He said it was expected that the total sum for investment on this site would be £70m which would include Council's Leisure Centre. He said this had progressed significantly during the past twelve months and Officers would be proceeding towards the production of outline business cases for all of the projects involved and Council's leisure projects was pivotal in advancing these works.

Councillor J Boyle agreed that the ambition for both Council's leisure projects should progress in tandem where possible. He said the report provided an element of focus in terms of the rates estimates process both for this and future years. Whilst acknowledging the many and varied financial challenges currently facing Council going forward he felt it was important to provide a certain degree of perspective which was vital for the citizens of the City and District. He was aware of the ongoing negotiations in regards to the City of Derry Airport and encouraged those involved to continue with the discussions and deliberations and anticipated a reduction in expense to Council. However, it was vital that the level of government support previously outlined was forthcoming to enable these projects to be progressed.

Alderman McClintock referred to the need for Council to maintain its commitment to its strategic projects albeit with the financial complexities involved. However, she felt confident that this was achievable. She expressed concern in regards to the rates investment and the 0.5 increase albeit Council was not committing itself at this stage. She acknowledged the many variables at play which could impact on Council's financial position.

Councillor Gallagher concurred with the sentiments expressed by Councillor M Boyle in regards to the development of the two leisure centre projects simultaneously. He referred to a Notice of Motion by Sinn Fein which was submitted to the February 2020 Council Meeting regarding Templemore Sports Complex, which had subsequently been

withdrawn and to the possibility of one of the leisure projects taking precedence. He agreed that the Strabane Leisure Centre was part of a major strategic plan which had the potential to progress Strabane in terms of the strategic business plans for Strabane town centre, the new footbridge and all the projects relating to the Canal Basin and in terms of centralising education and health together with the leisure centre. He stated that the leisure centre was a key element which would activate the other projects. He stated that in terms of strategic planning this would create a massive footfall for Strabane town centre for the future.

The Committee

- Recommended**
- (a) that Council endorse the emerging funding strategy for Council's strategic capital projects including the re-development proposals for Templemore Sports Complex and Leisure Centre provision for Strabane;**
  - (b) that Members note that the funding strategy continues to be developed in parallel with consideration of the wider financial challenges associated with the Covid pandemic; and**
  - (c) that Members note that a further report will be developed for consideration on conclusion of decisions in relation to the 2021/2022 rates estimates process and on further advancement of discussions with government(s) on proposed airport funding models.**

### **GSP163/20 Job Support Scheme**

The Head of Human Resources presented the above report, a copy of which had previously been circulated. She advised that the purpose of the report was to update Members on how it was planned to implement the Job Support Scheme and seek endorsement of the approach to date.

The Head of Human Resources pointed out that following completion of the report, further changes to the scheme had been announced by the government including an extension of the Furlough Scheme for a further month. She stated that the current Furlough Scheme had been in place since March 1 and to date 270 employees had been furloughed mainly across leisure services and visitor services. The employees concerned had been furloughed with 100 per cent pay. She said it was proposed that the new Job Support Scheme would come into effect on 1 December and the Department of Finance had confirmed that Council could access the scheme.

Councillor M Boyle welcomed the report. Reference 3.2 of the report in regards to hours worked she said it would be important that when implemented employees were made fully aware of Council's expectations.

The Head of Human Resources assured that Officers would communicate to employees and to Trade Unions how it was planned to utilise the scheme.

The Chief Executive anticipated that the impact of the scheme on employees would be seamless. He stated that all negotiations in regards to the application of the scheme would be carried out by the Officer team and no burden would be placed on employees. However, all necessary information would be communicated to those employees concerned.

Councillor Reilly said he understood that during the first wave of the pandemic, student nurses received financial support from the Department of Health. However, this had ended and had not been reintroduced even though figures in regards to Covid case numbers had risen dramatically.

The Committee

**Recommended**

**(a) that Members note Officer's plan to implement the Job Support Scheme and endorse the approach to date; and**

**(b) that Council write to the Department of Health requesting that the payment to student nurses introduced in the first**

**wave of the pandemic be reinstated in the current circumstances.**

**GSP164/20 Overview of Projects and Initiatives to Promote the Languages of Irish and Ulster-Scots**

The Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer presented the above report, a copy of which had previously been circulated. She advised that the purpose of the report was to provide Members with an overview of projects and initiatives which have been undertaken to promote the languages of Irish and Ulster-Scots in the 2019/2020 period.

Councillor Durkan welcomed the report. She stated that as an Irish language speaker and a lover of languages and someone with a keen interest in indigenous languages generally, she felt it was very important to note that Council was being progressive in meeting its obligations in regards to Irish and Ulster Scots. She also felt it was necessary that more positive reflections of Council's working languages continued. It was disheartening that many of the discussions around language arose from negativity and were often politicised. She referred to the report by the Committee of Experts from the European Council which set out recommendations which could be further explored. She also referred to the New Decade, New Approach legislation which was to be brought forward during this mandate of the Assembly and she understood that work was ongoing with Irish language organisations. She stated that this was a package of legislation which included Ulster Scots.

She commended the excellent work carried out by Council's Language Officer on a very limited budget despite which this Council surpassed other Councils in terms of promoting Ulster Scots. She referred to the work carried out by the Irish Language Forum which was an engagement forum for the Irish language community across the City and District. She also felt it would be timely for Council to reconvene the Language Working Group which had not met since the onset of Corona Virus and possibly review the terms of reference of the Working Group.

Councillor Cooper also welcomed the report and acknowledged that as pointed out by an external body Council was meeting if not exceeding its obligations in regards to the promotion of Irish and Ulster Scots. He referred to the extensive work being carried out by the Policy Officer

(Irish Language) and his Team. Council was exceeding expectations in regards to the promotion of Irish as well as Ulster Scots and this was within the context of the Irish Language Action and the progress made in relation thereto. He also agreed with the suggestion put forward by the previous speaker in regards to reconvening the Languages Working Group given the recent disruption caused by Covid. This could examine how to work on the progress made to date given the work carried out in recent years and the fact that there was now greater political support for progression in regards to the Irish language in particular. He looked forward to further proposals and events being presented in the future virtually or otherwise.

Councillor J Boyle expressed his support for the sentiments expressed by Councillor Durkan. He acknowledged that Council was meeting, if not exceeding its obligations in regards to Irish and Ulster Scots. He also agreed that the Languages Working Group be reconvened in order to work on the progress made to date.

Councillor Donnelly concurred with the proposal put forward by Councillor Durkan in regards to reconvening the Languages Working Group and the review of the terms of reference. He expressed concern that despite the extensive work carried out by the Working Group in regards to signage, a final decision had not yet been agreed on this matter.

The Committee

- Recommended**
- (a) that Members note the positive progress made to date in fulfilling Council's obligations under the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages as illustrated by the breadth and diversity of projects and initiatives being undertaken to promote Irish and Ulster Scots;**
  - (b) that Members endorse the approach undertaken to date; and**
  - (c) that the Language Working Group be reconvened and the terms of reference of the Working Group be reviewed.**

## **Open for Information**

### **GSP165/20 Risk Assessment of the Role of a Councillor**

The Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer presented the above report, a copy of which had previously been circulated. She advised that the purpose of the report was to provide Members with a copy of the reviewed Risk Assessment on the Role of a Councillor.

Members noted the content of the report.

### **GSP166/20 Update on Strategic Growth Partnership - October 2020**

The Strategic Business Manager presented the above report, a copy of which had previously been circulated. She advised that the purpose of the report was to provide Members of the Committee with an update on the most recent meeting of the Derry City and Strabane District Strategic Growth Partnership (Community Planning Partnership) held virtually on Thursday 22 October 2020.

Members noted the content of the report.

### **GSP167/20 Covid 19 Briefings**

The Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer presented the above report, a copy of which had previously been circulated. She advised that the purpose of the report was to update Members on all Covid 19 Briefings held from 22 May 2020 to 20 October 2020.

Members noted the content of the report.

### **GSP168/20 NILGA Update**

The Strategic Business Manager presented the above report, a copy of which had previously been circulated. She advised that the purpose of the report was to provide Members with a copy of correspondence issued to the Chief Executive from the NILGA Office bearers dated 8 October 2020 and the NILGA weekly bulletins issued in October 2020.

Members noted the content of the report.

### **GSP169/20 Press Office – Media Evaluation Report for September**

The Media and PR Officer presented the above report, a copy of which had previously been circulated. She advised that the purpose of the report was to provide Members of the Committee with a copy of the Council's Corporate Communications Press Office media evaluation report for the month of September.

Councillor J Boyle, on behalf of the SDLP, expressed his appreciation for the work carried out by Council's Public Relations section who on numerous occasions had gone beyond the call of duty for both Officers and elected representatives. He said they were extremely effective in carrying out their duties in a very challenging environment. He referred to their output in regards to the level of enquiries received by them, which he said was first class. He said the level of support provided by this Section to Officers, elected representatives, the Mayor and Deputy Mayor was outstanding. He referred to the fact that during Covid they had delivered messages on behalf of central government to businesses across the City and District. He said the Mayor had indicated that some government Departments had been very forthcoming in their praise for the team.

The Chairperson concurred with Councillor J Boyle's comments.

#### **GSP170/20 Northern Ireland Housing Council Update**

The Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer presented the above report, a copy of which had previously been circulated. She advised that the purpose of the report was to provide Members with the most recent Housing Bulletin.

Members noted the content of the report.

#### **GSP171/20 NI Charter for Elected Member Development**

The Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer presented the above report, a copy of which had previously been circulated. She pointed out that the purpose of the report was to advise Members of Council's successful review of progress against the NI Charter Plus for Elected Member Development and maintenance of Charter status.

Members noted the successful review against the NI Charter Plus for Elected Member Development.



The Chairperson commended the Democratic Services Officer and her team on retaining the NI Charter Plus and providing and sourcing new training courses requested by Members.

Councillor Boyle concurred with the Chairpersons remarks in regards to this matter.