

Present:

Cllr. Declan Bree	Cllr. Frank McBrearty	Cllr. Jimmy McClearn
Cllr. Donal Lyons	Cllr. Donal Gilroy	Cllr. Jack Murray
Cllr. Orla Leyden	Cllr. Jarlath Munnely	Cllr. Joe Sheridan
Cllr. John Naughten	Cllr. Patrick McGowan	Cllr. Enda McGloin
Cllr. David Maxwell	Cllr. Declan McDonnell	Cllr. David Collins
Cllr. Brian McKenna	Cllr. Niall McNelis	Cllr. Craig Lovett
Cllr. Michael Crowe	Cllr. Justin Warnock	

Mr Brendan McGrath (Chief Executive Galway City Council)

At the start of the Meeting Leas Cathaoirleach Cllr. Jimmy McClearn took the Chair until Agenda Item No. 5 when the Cathaoirleach Christy Hyland joined the Meeting and resumed in the Chair.

Apologies: Cllr. Tim Broderick, Cllr. Sean Smith, Cllr. John Caulfield, Cllr. Enda Stenson

Officials: Northern & Western Regional Assembly:

Mr David Minton (Director)
Mr Denis Kelly (Assistant Director & Senior Planner)
Mr Gerry Doyle (Assistant Director)
Mr Conall McGettigan (Senior Executive Planner)
Mr Frank Flanagan (Senior Executive Planner)
Mr John Daly (Economic and Sustainable Development Officer)
Ms Catriona Meehan (Clerical Officer)

1) Adoption of the Draft Supplementary Standing Orders regulating the proceedings of the Assembly when holding remote meetings

Proposed: Cllr. Donal Lyons

Seconded: Cllr. Donal Gilroy

Resolved:

"That the Draft Supplementary Standing Orders regulating the proceedings of the Assembly when holding remote meetings be adopted for the holding of this meeting."

2) Adoption of the Minutes of the Meeting of the Northern & Western Regional Assembly held on the 10th December 2021 (circulated):

Proposed by: Cllr. Donal Lyons

Seconded by: Cllr. Justin Warnock

Resolved:

"That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Northern & Western Regional Assembly held on 10th December 2021 be adopted".

3) Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

4) Government Update with Minister Charlie McConalogue TD, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The Leas- Cathaoirleach Cllr. Jimmy McClearn welcomed the Minister for Food, Agriculture and the Marine, Minister Charlie McConalogue and acknowledged the Minister's great work to date which has been of major benefit to the Region.

Minister Charlie McConalogue thanked the Leas-Cathaoirleach and the Members for inviting him to speak at the meeting. Minister McConalogue stated that he wanted to give an update regarding matters he was currently addressing in his Department, with a particular focus on the Northern and Western Region.

Minister McConalogue highlighted the challenge that Brexit presents especially in relation to the Marine Sector. He also emphasised the opportunities for the Agricultural sector in terms of the new CAP stating that it is a great opportunity for the indigenous food and tourism sectors across the region. The Minister stated that due to agreements in place the economy was largely sheltered from the negative impacts of Brexit, however he acknowledged the impact Brexit had on the Fishery industry. Minister McConalogue stated that work in relation to responding to these challenges was ongoing especially regarding the re-negotiation of the new Common Fisheries Policy due to be agreed at the end of the year. He stated that there will be significant investment in the marine infrastructure in particular the small ports and harbours.

Minister McConalogue stated that from an agricultural point of view it has been a really important period with the development of the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). He stated that the programme increases the national Co-funding of CAP by 50% from the previous CAP and stated that previously the total allocation was €2 billion, adding this has now increased by 50%. Minister McConalogue highlighted the important work in re-balancing average payments in this region with other regions. Minister McConalogue stated that he fought to have a target for Climate Change for the Agriculture sector that would be appropriate to continue to develop and add value to the farming sector while also contributing to the overall economy wide target of 51% reduction of emissions by 2030. He added that this reduction would also add to the attractiveness of the produce being produced on our farms.

He stated that while housing was not his direct responsibility, he recognised that Local Authorities would need significant support to be able to address the housing issue but added the funding was there to address this challenge. He acknowledged the recently published 'Vacancy and Dereliction Report' by the Assembly which highlighted the extent of the challenge of rejuvenating our towns and villages in the Region. Minister McConalogue stated that the current Government has a strong focus on balanced regional development adding that this can be seen through the Rural Regeneration Development Fund and other funds focussed on developing the Region

The Leas Cathaoirleach invited comments and questions for the Minister, below is a summary of the opinions expressed:

- The urgent need for housing was highlighted and the lack of flexibility in the area of zoning and planning was noted. It was stated that the banks needed to do more to assist first time buyers.
- It was proposed that the matching funding required from local authorities in the region to contribute to a variety of development funds should be reduced due to the status of the region as a Region in Transition.
- It was highlighted that every industry and area of our Region has been affected by Covid 19 especially the tourism sector. The importance of tourism for our region was emphasised and it was added that the Government needs to invest in the area to restore it to what it was before the pandemic.
- It was noted that the level of investment by Government in the region is behind the other two regions.
- The issue of proposed restrictions on poultry growers in Co. Monaghan was raised. A commitment was sought from the Dept of Agriculture that there will be a representative from the Department that will sit on the Committee, being set up to support poultry farmers.
- The challenges facing Mushrooms farms accessing peat was also highlighted, it was stated that the supply from local bogs was being restricted. It was questioned how container loads of compost were allowed in from other EU countries, but local production was being restricted.
- Brexit was stated as having a negative impact on the farming sector especially in Donegal. Brexits impact on the fishery sector was also raised and the concern was raised that in light of Brexit that larger fishing fleets will deplete our fishing stocks further
- The issue of the ownership of the estuary of the River Foyle right up to Lifford Bridge was raised. It was stated that the Government needed to address this issue.

- The issue of defective building materials in certain areas was also raised. A meeting was requested with the Minister to discuss this issue. It was added that this crisis is also affecting housing crisis and impacting the housing list in certain areas.
- Members recognised the great work the Minister had done on the CAP especially in relation to sustaining incomes for small and medium sized farms. The importance of incentivising young farmers was also highlighted due to the sectors aging population.
- The issue of commercial monoculture forestry in the region was raised. It was hoped that a meeting with the minister on this matter could be organised regarding afforestation and over saturation of forestry in the region.
- The issue of wool in farming and the lack of a market for it was raised. It was stated that if there was any pilot scheme to be introduced this region was best placed to carry it out.
- The Minister was thanked for his attendance at many marts in the region, the importance of these meetings was noted.
- Slipways and piers in inland counties were mentioned in relation to the difficulty getting funding to establish and maintain the facilities.
- It was added that in the recent COVID 19 pandemic walking areas including Blueways / Greenways were very important recreation facilities. It was stated that farmers should be incentivised to give up land for the establishment of Blueway's etc.
- It was stated that the new CAP had the opportunity to support new solar farms that will be built in rural areas in the coming years. It was stated that these lands could have a multipurpose use e.g., part farming part biodiversity part power generation. It was suggested that CAP should help farmers and communities with these transitions.
- The inability to develop along National Primary Roads was highlighted.

Responses

- Minister McConalogue stated that the housing for all plan by Minister O'Brien seeks to address the challenges and administrative difficulties around progression on housing. He added that it was great to see despite Covid there were over 30,000 housing commencements in 2021. Minister McConalogue acknowledged there were still many challenges in the sector. Minister McConalogue stated that LA's will be supported to ensure that the available the funding translates into construction of houses as soon as possible.
- With regards to the issue around match funding the Minister stated that this issue reflects the level of investment that has come from the Government, he acknowledged the pressure this funding is placing on the Local Authorities in terms of co-funding.
- He stated he was putting forward an updated marine programme for the next couple of years, as part of this he will be looking to change the co-funding requirement from 75% to 85% meaning 15% will be the ask off the Local Authorities. He stated this would hopefully allow LA's really benefit from investment in Marine infrastructure.
- Minister McConalogue agreed that the region is keenly aware that the region is a region in transition. He stated that this is factored into the Governments thinking in terms of investment into the future. Minister McConalogue acknowledged the point about the 60:40 contribution of the EU and the government compared to the previous 50:50 spread.
- He also agreed the importance of tourism in the Region highlighting the new bank holiday which will bring a boost to the Region in a traditionally quiet time of the year.
- Minister McConalogue took onboard the points made in relation to the banks and he added that he will be meeting with three main banks regarding some agricultural and rural issues he stated he will take the point raised to them also re supporting first time buyers.

- The Minister stated that the new CAP will bring additional investment into the Region. He stated that the investment that will be received by farmers will eventually end up in the local economy.
- In relation to the issue of ammonia in poultry production, Minister McConalogue stated that he had met with poultry farmers in Cavan to discuss the issue and engage with the EPA around it. He stated that the industry is a shining light, and that the majority of our poultry nationally is concentrated in Cavan and Monaghan.
- With regards the issue of the crucial peat for the mushroom sector he stated that the sector is particularly affected because it needs freshly dug peat due to moisture and bacteria content. Minister McConalogue stated he has been liaising with people in the sector and is trying to identify certain bogs which can be used to ensure that domestic peat production can continue for the mushroom sector. He stated that he did not want to be importing peat into the country as we should be able to supply our own sector.
- Minister McConalogue acknowledged the issue with Brexit and farming near the border. He stated that in relation to fisheries the state did manage to maintain access to the British waters if this had not been secured it would have been devastating for the industry. He acknowledged the ongoing issue with large non-Irish trawlers. Minister McConalogue stated that oversight and control is really important in this area.
- In relation to the Mica issue Minister McConalogue stated it has been a blight on houses affected in the Northern and Western Region and that the progress in addressing the issues had been much too slow. He stated that the costs of the scheme will be updated soon to reflect the building costs today. Minister McConalogue added that new challenges are emerging relating to other damaging materials. He stated that it is vital that whenever a homeowner comes to partake in the scheme that their circumstances are taken into account in terms of the compensation they can apply for.
- In relation to forestry Minister McConalogue stated there needed to be more progress in terms of afforestation across the country but acknowledged it needed to be balanced. He stated that we need to change the attitude and make forestry part of farming. Minister McConalogue acknowledged that the system needs to include more native woodland in the mix of forestry being planted.
- He stated that in relation to wool in farming new uses are being explored to develop a market for the important by product of sheep farming.
- In relation to solar energy, he agreed that there is huge potential in this area for farmers. Minister McConalogue stated that in the budget last October he announced an increase in grant aid for on farm solar energy. Adding that the installation of Solar infrastructure at farm level qualifies for 60% grant aid. Minister McConalogue stated the grant aid and the ability to feed into the grid will see a significant increase in the uptake of solar farming. He stated that in recent weeks the Government announced plans to have a feed in tariff so that energy can be returned to the grid.
- He also acknowledged the point regarding the National Primary Roads and that certain regulations are inhibiting on expansion and development stating that the application of common sense was needed to foster enterprise.

Minister McConalogue again thanked members adding that he was a member of the Assembly when it was the BMW region and he thanked members for their engagement adding that he was happy for further engage with members individually or through the Assembly.

The Leas Cathaoirleach and the Director Mr David Minton thanked the Minister for his attendance and comprehensive presentation and response to comments.

Cathaoirleach Christy Hyland took back over the Chair.

5) **Planning and Economic Development**

a) **Proposed Material Alternations to Draft Roscommon County Development Plan 2021-2027 (for noting - report circulated)**

Mr Denis Kelly explained to members that the Assembly was consulted on 7th December and the closing date for submissions was 14th January. Therefore, in accordance with agreed procedure the report was furnished to the Cathaoirleach for endorsement of the submission and now brought to this Assembly Meeting for noting.

Proposed: Cllr. Donal Lyons

Seconded: Cllr. Declan McDonnell

Resolved:

'To note the submission made in relation to the Material Alterations to the Draft Roscommon County Development Plan 2021-2027'

Monaghan County Development Plan: Mr Kelly advised Members that two proposed variations to the Monaghan County Development Plan were received on 18th January. He stated that the item therefore couldn't be on the agenda, that there had not been time to fully examine the amendments before this meeting and that the closing date for receipt of submission will have passed before the next Assembly meeting. Mr Kelly advised that the report would be brought to the Cathaoirleach in the normal way before a submission would be made. He briefly outlined the nature of the proposed variations and that there would probably be no issues of concern.

Cllr. David Maxwell stated that all the councillors in Monaghan Co Council are fully in support of the motion. Cllr. Brian McKenna agreed with Cllr. Maxwell's statement. It was advised that the matter would be an item on the Agenda of the next monthly meeting.

b) **Submission to the All-Island Strategic Rail Review – joint consultation by the Minister for Transport, in partnership with the Minister for Infrastructure (N. Ireland) (circulated) (presentation noted at Appendix 1)**

Mr Kelly informed members that the deadline for the submission was that day, and that a draft submission had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting. Mr Kelly invited Mr Conall McGettigan to give a brief overview of the report.

Mr McGettigan provided a detailed presentation (Appendix 1) regarding the submission being made to the All-Island Rail review.

The Cathaoirleach invited Members to provide feedback or questions relating to the presentation and draft submission. Points raised included:

- Huge deficit in NW & Central border highlighted and need for Derry-Dublin corridor to be examined, including connecting up Omagh and Monaghan.
- Agreement on the importance of linking important centres and linking the four corners of the country.
- There was an emphasis on the potential of using the existing unused rail infrastructure to improve regional connectivity. The importance of reinstatement of the Western Rail Corridor (WRC) was endorsed.
- Members stated the importance of freight in the region, noting the opportunity to link Ballina to Foynes Port would be very beneficial for the region.
- Questioned if Ireland West Airport Knock (IWAK) was noted.
- It was suggested that the high-speed Dublin -Sligo line should be electric in the future.
- Dual track between Galway/Athlone was supported.
- Promote a Dual Track from Sligo to Longford.
- Members noted that creation of new rail lines would generate huge economic benefit locally, nationally and to each community.

- Members noted that rail infrastructure was very beneficial to the carbon targets and green goals of the Government.
- The safety of rail infrastructure in comparison to road transport was noted.
- It was agreed that the inclusion of maps would enhance the report.

In response Mr Conall McGettigan advised that the document would be reviewed to incorporate any new issues raised. He clarified that the suggested linkage of Monaghan into the Dublin – Derry corridor may give rise to engineering issues with bringing the line directly from Omagh to Monaghan. Monaghan had been captured but the potential of bringing the route from Omagh would be incorporated. It was clarified that IWAK was mentioned in Chapter 3 as a spur from the WRC. Mr Denis Kelly advised that electrification of the entire rail network is included in Regional Ask 7. and that freight had been mentioned in the document with reference to Galway to Limerick but undertook to incorporate connectivity to Foynes. Mr Kelly said that the team will attempt to reflect all the comments in the best way possible.

Mr David Minton (Director) recognised Mr Kelly and the Planning team for all the work put into this meeting including this item, the County Development Plans and the Vacancy and Dereliction Report. He acknowledged the amount of work needed to pull it all together for the meeting.

Proposed: Cllr. Donal Lyons

Seconded: Cllr. Jarlath Munnelly

Resolved:

‘To make the submission to the All-Island Strategic Rail Review’

c) Vacancy and Dereliction Analysis (for noting) – John Daly

Mr Denis Kelly reminded members of the detailed presentation made by Mr John Daly at the last meeting regarding Vacancy and Dereliction in the Region. He advised that the analysis has now been published adding there had been a lot of positive feedback. He thanked the members for their contributions in the last meeting. He invited Mr John Daly to make a brief presentation on the ‘Regional Vacancy and Dereliction Analysis’ report.

Mr Daly gave a short slide presentation on the publication, highlighting some key points. He thanked members for their feedback from the previous meeting which had been taken into account when finalising the report. He stated that purpose of the report was to implement RPO 3.6 of the RSES, He explained that this aims to identify vacancy hotspots in the regions and influence the designated housing policy under housing for all. Mr Daly stated that most importantly will influence the implementation of the future Town Centre First plan.

Mr Daly stated that the reports key findings are as follows:

- Just under 40% of Irelands vacant and derelict properties are located in the Northern and Western Region.
- There are 44,000 empty properties located in the region.
- 72% of the towns and villages based in the region recorded an above average residential vacancy rate.
- 59% of towns and villages based in this region recorded an above average commercial vacancy rate.

Mr Daly stated that this report also analysed the wastewater capacity in settlements of the Region. He stated that the report encourages positive discrimination towards the region as the report shows we are a lagging region. Mr Daly stated that the report had been broadly welcomed and has been mentioned in many national media outlets even being raised in the Dáil by Deputy Denis Naughten. He thanked the Members and Assembly staff who have contributed to the report and those who have promoted it in anyway.

Members were invited by the Cathaoirleach to comment or raise any questions. Points raised included:

- Members welcomed the report and acknowledged the level of work that went into it.
- The impact of the Pandemic on vacancy rates were noted.
- It was noted that the 44,000 vacant properties would go a long way to facilitating those on the housing list.
- It was questioned whether a lack of infrastructure, lack of transport links or a lack of broadband impacts the commercial vacancy rate.
- It was stated that Zoning needed to be looked at.
- It was questioned whether Irish water were the best organisation to address the wastewater capacity issue.
- A breakdown detailing whether the properties were privately or publicly owned was requested.
- Members requested support not punishment for owners of derelict and vacant properties, it was emphasised that there are different categorisation of vacant properties and that certain factors needed to be taken into account. It was stated that some properties are debt free but can't get a grant or a loan to do them up and they can't sell them, so it is not their fault that they have a vacant/derelict property. IT was also noted that maintaining the upkeep of vacant properties is very important, so it doesn't impact the look of an area. The importance of grants in addressing this issue was stated.
- It was stated that there needed to be a 3-tier rate system.
- Members noted that some of the Irish water figures were out of date.
- It was noted that work on council properties were taking too long to be completed.
- It was stated that imposing of rates had worked in some areas, but it was acknowledged that a one size fits all approach would not be suitable, out of the box thinking was called for.
- Members noted that the caps on construction in certain areas needed to be addressed.
- IT was stated that Local Authorities should not be commended for doing nothing to tackle the issue of Vacancy and Dereliction.

Mr John Daly agreed that there needs to be a solution-based approach. He stated that there have been few incentives to date to encourage property owners to redevelop vacant and derelict properties, but the Minister Darragh O'Brien has a scheme being developed with a potential €30,000 grant to redevelop these properties. He added that there is talk of relaxation of some planning rules however he stated that he believed there needs to bigger moves to address the challenges. Mr Daly stated that in the report, recommends that a case study or pilot scheme should be completed in this region to examine the benefits of tax incentives, subsidies, or higher grant rates on the issue. Mr Daly agreed with that the figures relating to Irish Water are out of date. He added that there was a joint license with the two other Assemblies with Geo Directory, it is agreed that we will get the data up to September 2021 in the first quarter of this year and this data will constantly be updated. Mr Daly agreed that when Covid supports taper off it will lead to more vacant commercial properties appearing. He acknowledged there is no breakdown between public and private vacant properties in the GEO directory database but there are public figures available elsewhere. He stated he will send on the report to members after meeting.

Mr Denis Kelly thanked members for recognising the importance of this type of publication adding that a one size fits all policy would not be appropriate he said that this type of report can be used to identify what areas need prioritising he also stated that one of the recommendations is there should be adequate resources for councils to address this issue.

6) Correspondence

Mr Gerry Doyle noted the intent of a resolution received from Sligo County Council after their December meeting. He stated the proposal sought to ask the Minister for Rural Community Development to increase the funding under RRDF from 75% to 90% for Local Authorities in our Region, which has been identified as a Region in Transition, to ensure projects can be funded at local level.



Cllr. Donal Gilroy agreed to put the item forward as a motion for the next meeting.

7) Any other Business

It was agreed to move the March meeting to Friday March 25th at 11am due to the announcement of a public holiday on Friday the 18th of March.

An updated schedule of meetings will be circulated to members.

This concluded the business of the meeting.

Signed: _____ (Cathaoirleach)

Date: _____