

**Minutes of the Northern & Western Regional Assembly Meeting held on the 16th February 2024 at
11.00am in Roscommon Chamber**

Present:

Cllr. Jack Murray	Cllr. Joe Sheridan	Cllr. Justin Warnock
Cllr. Declan Bree	Cllr. Donal Gilroy	Cllr. Declan McDonnell
Cllr. Christy Hyland	Cllr. Orla Leyden	Cllr. Donal Lyons
Cllr. Tim Broderick	Cllr. Jimmy McClearn	Cllr. Patrick McGowan
Cllr. David Maxwell	Cllr. Niall McNeils	Cllr. Jarlath Munnely
Cllr. Brian McKenna	Cllr. Enda Stenson	

Presided: Cllr. John Naughten (Cathaoirleach)

Apologies:

Cllr. David Collins, Cllr Michael Crowe, Cllr Aine Smith, Cllr Frank McBrearty, Cllr Enda McGloin

Officials: Northern & Western Regional Assembly:

Mr Denis Kelly (Director)
Mr Liam Conneally (Chief Executive Designate).
Mr Gerry Doyle (Assistant Director HR/Corporate/External Engagement)
Mr Paddy Austin (Assistant Director ERDF)
Mr Patrick Devine (Programme Executive)
Mr John Daly (Policy Research and Sustainable Development Officer)
Ms Tanya Whyte (Acting Senior Executive Planner)
Mr Declan Meehan (Acting Senior Executive Planner)
Ms Eimear Dowd (Regional Development Officer)
Ms Carmel Carrick (Auditor)
Ms Claire Callaghan (Clerical Officer)

Cathaoirleach John Naughten welcomed everyone to the meeting. He introduced Mr. Liam Conneally Chief Executive of Galway County Council as the Assembly's new Chief Executive Designate for the forthcoming two years. Mr Denis Kelly, Director, also welcomed the new Chief Executive Designate to the NWRA. Mr. Conneally thanked the Cathaoirleach and Director and advised the Members that he was delighted to be given the role of Chief Executive Designate for the Northern & Western Regional Assembly.

1. Adoption of the Minutes of the Meeting of the Northern & Western Regional Assembly held on January the 19th 2024 (Circulated)

Proposed by: Cllr Donal Lyons

Seconded by: Cllr David Maxwell

And unanimously resolved that:

"The minutes of the Meeting of the Northern & Western Assembly held on January 19th 2024 be adopted".

2. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

3. Directors Update

Mr. Kelly presented the Annual Work Programme 2024 as circulated and he gave an overview of the main points in the Work Programme, highlighting various elements therein.

Mr. Kelly gave a summary on Data2 Sustain, which is being led by Gerry Doyle Assistant Director NWRA. He said this is a significant project working with local authorities and SME's relating to digital transformation and a progress report would be presented at a future meeting.

Members Questions and Comments

Cathaoirleach John Naughten thanked Mr. Kelly for the presentation and acknowledged the busy year ahead. He pointed out the need to look at deficits in transport within the region and he also outlined the positives for the region, in particular the huge opportunity the new ATU status will be for the region which includes helping to keep young people in the region. A number of queries were discussed, including:

1. Can Elected Members be given the opportunity to participate in the Just Transition Fund (JTF) Programme Management Committee going forward.
2. Has funding been given to retrofit Council housing / buildings under ERDF.
3. Will the Assembly write to the NTA and re- emphasise the need for the outer Galway City Ring Road.
4. What can be done about the lack of progress in the development of the Region's Marine Potential and the absence of DMAPS.
5. Could they have an update on a new premises for the Assembly in Ballaghaderreen.

In response members were advised:

1. In relation to the Just Transition Programme, Mr Gerry Doyle advised that he has raised the point with the Executive of the Eastern and Midlands Assembly regarding Members being included in the Just Transition Programme Monitoring Committee meetings some time ago and he would contact them again in this regard.
2. Mr. Paddy Austin advised that the ERDF retrofit scheme currently in place is for owner occupiers who are in danger of energy poverty and that he was not aware of any schemes for Local Authority owned houses or buildings.
6. The Assembly will write to NTA to re- emphasise the need for the outer Galway City Ring Road.
3. The Chief Executive Designate volunteered to communicate with Coastal LAs in this region, as a follow-up on the NWRA report in relation to the marine.
4. Mr. Gerry Doyle explained that the Buildings sub committee have been looking at options in Ballaghaderreen for new premises and that these options were very limited. However, he added that there is a proposed Enterprise Centre for Ballgahagdereen currently being applied for funding by a local group An Bealach. Planning permission has been received and the NWRA have issued a letter of support for this development in terms of its alignment with principles contained in the NWRA's RSES. The Assembly has also given a commitment to meet with An Bealach if this development progresses to explore options for the long term accommodation for the Assembly.

**Proposed by Cllr Leyden
Seconded by Cllr Broderick**

And unanimously resolved

“that the Executive of the Eastern and Midlands Assembly be written to, to request that Elected Members sitting on the Northern and Western Regional Assembly who are from the designated area in respect of JTF be appointed to the JTF Programme Monitoring Committee.”

Proposed: Cllr Donal Lyons
Seconded: Cllr Declan McDonnell

and unanimously resolved that:

“The Annual Work Programme 2024 be adopted”

4. Planning and Economic Development

(i) Report on Draft Ministerial Direction – Letterkenny LAP & LTP 2023- 2029 (for noting)

Members were advised that this item had been mentioned at the previous meeting and that the report was agreed with the Cathaoirleach before the submission was made, based on the report as circulated.

Proposed by: Cllr Donal Lyons
Seconded by : Cllr Jack Murray.

and unanimously resolved that:

“The Assembly noted and endorsed the report and submission as recommended.”

(ii) Report on Draft Ministerial Direction – Castlebar LAP 2023 – 2029

Members were advised that this item had been mentioned at the previous meeting and that, in accordance with agreed procedure, the report was agreed with the Cathaoirleach before the submission was made, based on the report as circulated.

Proposed by: Cllr David Maxwell
Seconded by: Cllr Donal Gilroy

and unanimously resolved that:

“The Assembly noted and endorsed the report and submission as recommended.”

(iii) Consultation on the Offshore Renewable Energy Future Framework Policy Statement (DECC) (Appendix 1)

Mr Declan Meehan made a presentation on the report as circulated.

Members Questions and Comments

The Cathaoirleach thanked Mr Meehan for the presentation on the report and a discussion was held which acknowledged the Position Paper prepared by Dr Cormac Walsh for the NWRA 'Marine Spatial Planning and the Preparation of Designated Maritime Area Plans (DMAPs)'. It was ultimately agreed that the Chief Executive Designate would reach out to the coastal local authorities in the N&W region to further consider same, as the opportunities for the region are significant and need to be planned for.

Proposed by: Cllr Jarlath Munnelly

Seconded by: Cllr David Maxwell

and unanimously resolved that:

"The Assembly noted and endorsed the report on 'Offshore Renewable Energy Future Framework Policy Statement' and that a submission be made based on the report."

(iv) Drogheda joint Local Area Plan Issues Papers (For mention)

Members were advised that this was being brought to their attention for information purposes. It was advised that a submission was not being proposed at this stage of the process.

(v) Update on NPF Revision & Regional Renewable Electricity Strategy to be prepared by Regional Assemblies.

This item was deferred for discussion at forthcoming SPA Committee meetings.

(vi) Date to be agreed for rescheduled Border SPA (March 2024)

During discussion on potential dates for the Border SPA it emerged that the Scheduled West SPA Committee meeting also needed to be rescheduled. It was agreed that since the same material was to be discussed that a Joint Meeting of both Committees would be held on 13th of March 2024, commencing at 11.30am in a venue to be determined by the Executive.

(vii) Presentation on Regional Economic Trends, including Housing, and emerging data.

Mr John Daly gave the presentation to the members – (Appendix 2). He highlighted the latest trends on regional income. He stated that new data shows levels of income of the population and reflects economic wellbeing of citizens. The average disposable income is below the scale average as per CSO's latest preliminary figures. It shows Donegal, Roscommon and Cavan are the lowest level of disposable income and in 2022 all areas of the region were below the national average. This highlights the gap in disposable income in the region.

Section 2 of the report shows population growth rates continue to be higher in the Eastern and Midlands region. The Northwest grew but not to the levels of the other regions. He pointed out that these results were contrary to national planning guidelines and it was needed to see growth balanced out over all regions. He added that the Eastern regional share of population is disparately spread across the region. He stated that output activity is becoming more concentrated in the Eastern and Midlands region & the housing stock is not growing in the Northern and Western region nearly as fast as the rate in the Eastern and Midland region. The number of residential units commenced were lower than previous for the region and this is completely contrary to what is set out in the National Planning policy.

Cathaoirleach John Naughten thanked John for his presentation and highlighted that the region went from 25% to 11% by 2023 of new housing being built. He also highlighted that it is harder for small businesses to obtain finance, and this was one of the issues. Another factor is the larger developers in the Eastern Region pose a big challenge going forward.

Members Questions and Comments.

Cllr Jimmy McClearn noted the content of the report is not what the members wanted to hear. He said when the National Planning Framework was launched to ensure mistakes of the past couldn't and wouldn't be repeated. However, he stated that the reality is that there are areas with populations in decline and questioned what interventions are being introduced to correct the imbalance. He commented that if this trend continues the National Planning Framework would be a failure.

Cllr McNelis asked how many new houses did the 2% represent? Why is this happening and what will we do with this information, suggesting it needed to be highlighted.

Cllr Jack Murray commented on the housing crisis and indicative reasons, asking whether the number of new builds includes rebuilds/refurbishments.

Cllr Joe Sheridan made reference to the vacancy rates and asked if details were available.

Cllr Declan McDonnell asked if a break down between affordable/social/private new builds can be provided.

Cllr Patrick McGowan commented that this is also an international problem and not just unique to the NW region, with lots of countries experiencing the same issues.

Cllr Tim Broderick asked to define disposable income and pointed out that there was a huge disconnect between the regions. He commented that Irish Water now has responsibility for Waste Water management, which was previously the responsibility of the Councils. This has caused issues with approving new housing developments. He commented that they only concentrate on major urban areas, you need a minimum of 25 residents to qualify for new connections, which means no potential to increase housing on small scale projects. He noted that planning has been refused by Irish Water where there is not wastewater treatment system in place.

Cllr Clifford Kelly noted that there are many Global issues and barriers to regional growth is something worth looking at. He commented on Local issues in the region as a barrier to significant development and that this was a complex issue. The evidence for underinvestment in the region is highlighted in the presentation.

Responses

Mr John Daly confirmed that the CSO has defined disposable income as income after tax. The housing stock low in the past few years has been influenced by a lack of incentives to build and a lack of credit and the level of drop off in lending to SME's.

- Mr Daly confirmed that he can provide a breakdown of social/private developments from the Department of Housing. The Vacant and derelict data has been collected and he will have some more updated data looking at derelict housing and will provide this going forward. Mr Daly commented that the report was part of NWRA's consultation with stakeholders' bodies across region. He said 100k workers are required to meet building requirements. He said that the big issue with remote working is that the surveys show lots of hybrid working which does not indicate a move to the NW region. He also confirmed the Assembly are asking for sizeable interventions as part of budget submissions to address some of these issues.
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- Mr Kelly, Director, advised Members that whilst housing supply is a global issue it is notable that this region has been experiencing ongoing underinvestment in necessary enabling infrastructure which is impacting on the economic performance of this region – as outlined to An Taoiseach in December 2023.

Cllr Jack Murray proposed that an invitation be extended to Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, Leader Sinn Féin and Leader of the Opposition, to receive a delegation from the Assembly to provide the facts as outlined to An Taoiseach in the December meeting.

Cllr Patrick McGowan suggested that an invitation also issue to Minister Micheál Martin, An Tanaiste and Leader of Finna Fail.

Proposed by: Cllr Jack Murray

Seconded by: Cllr Patrick McGowan

and unanimously resolved that:

“The Assembly write to Minister Micheál Martin, An Tanaiste and Leader of Fianna Fail and also to Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, Leader of Sinn Féin and Leader of the Opposition, to receive a delegation from the Assembly to discuss the economic performance of the region.”

At 1pm Cathaoirleach John Naughten agreed to extend meeting to 1.30pm.

(5) ERDF Update including the THRIVE Programme

Mr Paddy Austin thanked the Assembly's Elected members and staff for the warm welcome he had received on starting with the Assembly. He outlined the areas of work for the ERDF team going forward and asked that Patrick Devine present on the Thrive programme.

Mr Patrick Devine gave a presentation on the THRIVE Programme – (Appendix 3). This schemes he stated was launched at the AIR Conference in Adare in February 2024 by Minister O'Donnell. He added that this programme is being delivered through 2 strands - Strand 1 relates to proposals regarding Town Centre First strategies from designated Key Towns from local authorities and 100% grant funding applies. He stated that Strand 2 is a competitive call which will fund one identified project from each local authority. He added that under Strand 2 public buildings of historical significance in need of renovation / repair to bring them back into public use can be included, limited to one per local Authority. He added that the evaluation of proposed projects received under the call will be by an independent Evaluation Committee and will be awarded based on the assessment of a range of issues including aesthetics, sustainability & the application of the New Bauhaus concepts and the readiness of the project to start.

Cathaoirleach John Naughten said that this was a welcome programme and very positive overall. Cllr Orla Leyden welcomed this programme and is very excited to see this programme rolled out. She asked what proportion of applications will be successful and what criteria was required for successful applicants. Cllr Patrick McGowan asked if there is an opportunity for other towns to get applications submitted outside of the key towns.

Mr Devine replied that there was a €30m budget, €2m for strand one and €28m for strand two. He said that there was potential for every Local Authority to be successful. He also said that this scheme was available only to key towns/city designated within the NWR RSES.

(6) Report on Association of Irish Regions Training Seminar held on 7-9th February 2024

This report was deferred due to time constraints.

(7) Email dated 30th of January from Minister Ryans private Secretary Amanda Corley

It was agreed that Minister Ryan should be written to again to seek a meeting before the term of the Assembly expires.

(8) Any other business

No items

This concluded the business of the meeting at 1.30pm.

Signed: 

Date: 19/4/24



**Northern & Western
Regional Assembly**