



NOAC

National Oversight
and Audit Commission



Louth County Council Scrutiny Report

NOAC Report No. 29 - May 2021

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Chair's Opening remarks

The Local Government Reform Act 2014 introduced significant changes to a wide range of aspects of the local government system, including in relation to matters of accountability and oversight. In that regard, the Act provided for the establishment of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) as the statutory body overseeing the local government sector. NOAC was established in July 2014 under the 2014 Act to provide independent oversight of the local government sector. NOAC's functions are wide ranging, involving the scrutiny of performance generally and financial performance specifically, supporting best practice, overseeing implementation of national local government policy and monitoring and evaluating implementation of corporate plans, adherence to service level agreements and public service reform by local government bodies.

Since I became Chair of NOAC in September 2018, I continued the good work that had been started by the previous NOAC Chair in meeting with the Chief Executives of the local authorities and their Management teams. As outlined below this process has evolved over time and continues to evolve.

The preparation of the profile report also identifies the performance of local authorities in relevant NOAC reports and provides for further examination of the results of these reports. The Scrutiny Process requires time and resources from NOAC and the local authorities in preparation of the profile report and for the Stage 1 and Stage 2 meetings. NOAC considers to date that the investment of time and resources has been worthwhile and necessary.

I have been struck by the welcome and sharing of information that has taken place at the meetings. It has provided an opportunity to learn, to listen to how the particular local authority operates, the challenges they face, the plans and ideas that have been developed and gives an opportunity to reflect on what is working well and areas that need to be addressed. It has identified areas of good practice and many of these ideas have been showcased at the NOAC Good Practice Seminars over the years. I look forward to continuing to work closely and collaboratively with all the local authorities and want to use this opportunity to thank all the Chief Executives and their teams for the time and courtesy and welcome extended to NOAC in this process.



Michael McCarthy, Chair
20 May 2021



Background to Profiles and Scrutiny Programme

In February 2017, NOAC, in accordance with its statutory functions, began to review the performance of individual local authorities. The starting point was getting an overall picture derived from the performance indicator report results, the Local Government Audit Service (LGAS) audit reports, the financial position and revenue collection performance. Information on private rented sector inspections, housing stock management and maintenance data and Customer Satisfaction was all considered by using the relevant data contained in the NOAC reports published to date.

At the outset the importance of the meetings was emphasised over and above the data which NOAC had regarding local authorities. There was also an objective to broaden the NOAC members' understanding of the work of the local authorities and the individual priorities and pressures they faced and to put the information in context. Therefore, NOAC wanted to get the background perspective from the authorities and any other datasets that the Councils consider should be taken into account. Significant work is required to bring this part together and the work of the NOAC Secretariat and the local authority NOAC Coordinators must be acknowledged.

Following an initial face to face meeting, which is called a Stage 1 meeting, local authorities were invited to a Stage 2 meeting where more detailed questions would be carried out in the areas of interest to NOAC, including customer service and IT investment, collection rates, the quality of information provision to the public etc. These meetings would take place after or latterly before the main NOAC board meeting with all the board members present.

The purpose

The process gives NOAC the opportunity to have oversight of all the local authorities and considers the factors that facilitates them in performing well, along with the barriers that may exist relevant to the individual local authority. The meetings enable the local authorities to outline their strong and weak performing areas. It allows for further examination of the results of the performance indicators and shows the results in context. It must be emphasised that these meetings differ from the Performance Indicator (PI) Validation meetings which are carried out by the Performance Indicator Working Group to interrogate the results reported in relation to selected performance indicators. These meetings, while very informative, are specific to the performance indicator process and do not consider other areas of performance that NOAC have oversight of, including Customer Service, Internal Audit, Corporate Plans etc.

During the meeting NOAC can see areas where consistent under-performance is highlighted and which can be examined further. It also allows for exemplars of best practice to be identified and used to share with other local authorities. The process as outlined, is not a follow up to the PI reports, but does enable consideration of issues that may warrant further clarification or investigation in the PI process. Local authorities have all indicated in the meetings thus far that they compare their performance and results in relation to what they deem as similar local authorities. This grouping could be reviewed further by NOAC and adopted for the results of some of its reports. Groupings are not only on size but, on levels of finances, urban and rural, staff numbers and other factors.

The Scrutiny Process

The process has evolved over time, allowing it to become more structured, formal and documented. Given the importance of the work, it is led by the Chair of NOAC (or a delegated alternate, if required) with support from NOAC members and the Executive. The formal process agreed by the Board is termed as a constructive dialogue and is laid out below.

1

Stage 1 (NOAC Scrutiny Visit)

Meeting held with NOAC Chair (or alternate) and/or one additional NOAC member and member(s) of the NOAC Executive. The Chief Executive and members of the management team, as invited by the Chief Executive shall attend.

- Stage 1 notice issued to Chief Executive of the local authority.
- Profile report prepared by NOAC Executive with input from the local authority. This is circulated along with an agenda to the local authority and NOAC attendees in advance of the visit. The report is based on general and specific information from NOAC reports relating to the local authority in question.
- Local authority to present on issues arising and take questions from attending NOAC members.
- Meeting minutes prepared and issued for comment.

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Stage 2 (NOAC Scrutiny Meeting)

Appearance at full NOAC meeting. The Chief Executive and members of the management team, as invited by the Chief Executive shall attend.

- Stage 2 notice to attend NOAC meeting issued to Chief Executive of local authority.
- Profile report updated as required and circulated along with an agenda to local authority and NOAC members in advance of the meeting.
- Local authority to present on issues arising and take questions from full NOAC board.
- Meeting minutes prepared for circulation to local authority for its comment.

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Stage 3 (NOAC Sign off and Publication)

Following completion of Stages 1 and 2 the Executive shall collate the material and present it to the NOAC Board as follows: -

- Final sign off on minutes / documents / reports.
- Comments / Findings / Recommendations to be made as required.
- Approval for completed records to be published.

Progress to date

2017

To commence the process, profiles were prepared in respect of Cork City Council, Louth and Offaly County Councils and these were forwarded to the Chief Executives of the authorities concerned. The NOAC Chair at the time, Pat McLoughlin, began this process with a meeting with the Chief Executive of Louth County Council for a general discussion on the profile in August 2017. This Stage 1 meeting was followed by a similar meeting with the Chief Executive of Cork City Council in September 2017. The final Stage 1 meeting to take place in 2017 was held with the Chief Executive of Offaly County Council in October 2017. In December 2017 Louth County Council attended a meeting with NOAC after the main NOAC Board meeting. This was the first Stage 2 meeting, which formed an important part of the overall process. These meetings served a particularly important function which allowed the Council to give an overview of their work and also gave an opportunity to the full NOAC Board to put questions to the Council and understand their situation in more depth.

2018

In 2018 the schedule consisted of eight meetings with local authorities, four each for Stage 1 and Stage 2. A Stage 2 meeting was held with Offaly County Council in January 2018. This was followed by another Stage 2 meeting with Cork City Council in March 2018.

A new Chair, Michael McCarthy, was appointed on 24 September 2018. The process continued with Westmeath County Council in October 2018 and Kerry County Council in December 2018. These were Stage 2 meetings with the full NOAC board as in these cases, the 2018 Performance Indicator validation meetings for these authorities were deemed sufficient as Stage 1 meetings. Further Stage 1 meetings were held with Roscommon County Council and Tipperary County Council.

2019

The format continued with 8 meetings with local authorities during the year. Five Stage 1 meetings and three Stage 2 meetings. The Stage 1 meetings were with Donegal County Council, Laois County Council, Clare County Council, Waterford City and County Council and Carlow County Council. Stage 2 meetings took place with Roscommon County Council, Tipperary County Council and Donegal County Council.

2020

A meetings list was scheduled for 2020 to cover 6 additional local authorities. The year commenced with a Stage 1 meeting with Monaghan County Council in February, along with two Stage 2 meetings with Laois County Council and Waterford City and County Council. Further meetings were scheduled for April, however due to the COVID crisis these meetings were required to be deferred.

The COVID restrictions presented some challenges to the meetings but it was decided to continue the Stage 2 meetings virtually and meetings were held with Clare, Monaghan, Waterford City and County, Carlow and Sligo. These were carried out by the WebEx platform.

A socially distanced Stage 1 meeting was held in person with Limerick City and County Council in August and with Sligo County Council in September 2020.

2021

COVID has had a huge impact on local authorities, and in particular, for NOAC on the Scrutiny process. The Stage 1 meetings have all been held in person thus far and restrictions have allowed for no Stage 1 meetings to be held yet in 2021. The Stage 2 meetings have progressed as these were capable of being held remotely, with one held in January 2021 with Limerick City and County Council. It is hoped to make up for lost time as the restrictions are relaxed and plans are in place to commence Stage 1 meetings as soon as it is possible to do so.

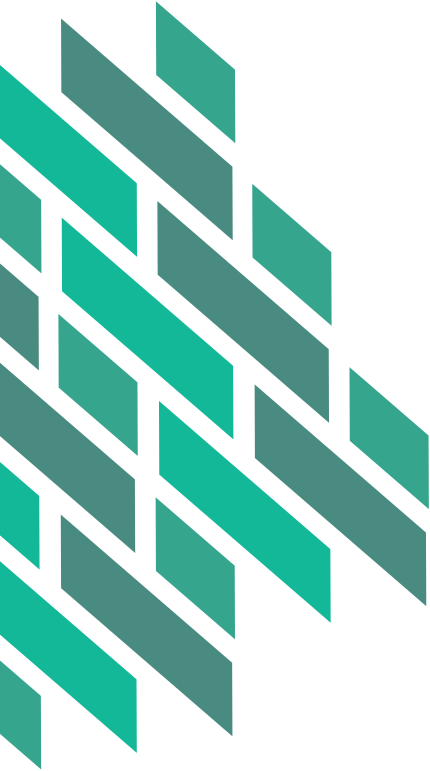
Future meetings and reports

This report outlines the purpose and the procedures and while the process may continue to evolve it would not be expected at this time to produce another master report, similar to this one. This report takes into account the first 13 local authorities which have completed the process. It would be intended that once all stages in the scrutiny process has been fully completed with the relevant other local authorities that the report would be published on that basis and would form part of the suite of reports under the umbrella of the Scrutiny Report Process. Later in quarter 2, 2021, Sligo County Council and Limerick City and County Council reports will be published. It is anticipated that progress will continue to be made with further Stage 1 and Stage 2 meetings so that each local authority will have participated in the process. It must be outlined that significant changes and delays have been experienced due to the restrictions imposed by COVID in 2020 and 2021.

Conclusion

The process thus far allowed for the NOAC chairman and members to get a greater understanding and insight into the challenges that face each of the local authorities. Also, issues such as collection rates, staff numbers, inspection rates, finances that are included in reports in some cases benefit from the explanation and discussion as to the reason behind these figures. The meetings also enabled NOAC to see the various priorities that each local authority considered relevant to their citizens and how they overcame various challenges and how they work collaboratively with other local authorities, state bodies and stakeholders. Areas of Good Practice have been identified along the way and these have contributed to presentations of these projects at the NOAC Good Practice Seminars in 2017, 2019 and 2020.

Louth County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in August 2017 and their Stage 2 meeting in December 2017. It is important to note that the material in this report is reflective of the position at that time. Therefore any changes to the profile from later NOAC reports are not included in this report. Areas where Louth County Council has performed particularly well in was in the re-letting and vacancy rates in social housing. The Council outlined how considerable resources had been allocated to reduce average re-letting times which at that time was 10 weeks but was still not quick enough given the extent of the housing needs in the county. Choice based lettings have also helped hugely by eliminating vacant periods associated with waiting for offers to be accepted. Lettings in Louth are all choice-based now, apart from disabled units. Louth was also invited to present at NOAC's first Good Practice Event in November 2017 on the work it had carried out on CPO for derelict and vacant units. Discussions took place also on the financial pressures facing the authority and how this was being addressed.



Louth County Council Scrutiny Process

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2. Stage 1 meeting August 2017 – Minutes	15
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4. Stage 2 Meeting December 2017 – Minutes	32



Louth County Council Profile

Population:	128,884
Area:	826km ²
Municipal Districts:	3 (Ardee, Drogheda, Dundalk)
Regional Assembly:	Eastern & Midland
WTE:	596.81
2017 Budget:	€98.88m

MISSION STATEMENT

To provide leadership and deliver high quality, citizen focused, responsive and effective services.

Introduction

While Louth is the smallest county in the State, it is the second most densely populated county in Ireland, with two of the largest towns in the country, Drogheda and Dundalk, coming under the remit of Louth County Council. Apart from these two major urban centres, which each have a population in the region of 40,000, the county also contains a number of substantial towns and villages including Ardee, Dunleer, Clogherhead and Carlingford. The county is strategically located on the Dublin - Belfast economic corridor and has strong links to its neighbouring local authorities in Northern Ireland.

By reason of its location, combined with a high quality infrastructure (road and rail), accessibility to ports and airports (north and south), high speed broadband and a skilled and educated workforce, the county is well placed to continue to grow in both population and economic terms. The overall population of Louth and its hinterland is set to grow to almost 140,000 by 2020. The population within a 60 kilometre radius of Drogheda is circa 1.8 million, while within a 60 minute radius of Dundalk it is circa 1.3 million. This large catchment area provides a strong skills set for potential employers to access.

Louth Economic Forum (LEF)

The forum was established in 2009 and was the first in the country. This was before economic development was a statutory function of local government. The current Independent Chairperson is Martin Cronin and the forum is comprised from the business sector of County Louth, Local Authority Management and all of the State Agencies with an interest in economic development. Their remit is to interact with those generating economic activity in the county and it is a one stop shop for potential investors. The Louth Economic Forum has devised an overall 10 point plan identifying specific areas to be addressed within its work programme. Task groups have been formed for each of the areas and a number of action plans have been developed. The award winning LEF continues to build partnerships and fosters a culture of joined-up thinking to proactively facilitate further economic development and job creation in Louth.

The Local Enterprise Office (LEO Louth)

This is the primary agency dedicated to driving the development of local enterprise, putting local small and micro businesses at the heart of job creation. It supports business start-ups and works to increase the job potential of new and existing small and micro businesses with information, advice, training, mentoring and selective financial support. Part of its vision is to act as the catalyst and advocate for the establishment of a best practice enterprise culture among start-ups and small businesses and to promote enterprise and self-employment as a viable career option among the wider population.

The LEO office works in tandem with the LEF and LCDC (Local Community Development Committee) to deliver the economic objectives contained within the Local Economic & Community Plan (LECP).

Retail Incentives

Recognising the need to continuously drive economic activity in the major urban centres in the county, the Council developed new retail investment brochures for the towns of Dundalk and Drogheda, as part of a campaign to promote the areas as excellent retail destinations in 2016. The Council also worked with Retail Excellence Ireland, to provide a one day “Service & Sales - Excellence Being the Very Best” event for businesses in September 2016.

Additionally, to further attract businesses into the towns, the Economic Development Unit developed a range of Business Incentive Schemes. Shop front design guidelines were put in place, further supported by the Shop Front Improvement Grant Scheme, Small Business Support Scheme and New Business Incentive Scheme. A total of 28 Shop Front Improvement Grant applications were received in 2016 with nine shop fronts completed by December, amounting to grants of over €12,000.

Summary of content relating to Louth County Council in NOAC reports to date

Corporate Plan

While the quality and clarity of presentation of the Louth Corporate Plan was good, compliance with the corporate planning requirements was not. Critical success factors were not identified, there was no content dealing with internal capacity and resources, potential for shared services or service level agreements and none of the implementation and monitoring elements were included. The 10 strategic objectives identified relate to Housing in Communities & Emergency Services, Environmental & Sustainable Energy, Infrastructure, Economic Development, Regional Gateway, Local Democracy, Resource Management, Arts Culture & Leisure, Customer Care and Broadband Access. Initiatives highlighted in the Plan include; working in partnership with the Department of Education and Skills to deliver the school building programme and working with the Office of Public Works to deal with the threat from coastal erosion and rising tidal levels.

The Council's response to NOAC's request for information regarding implementation indicated that monthly management reports to the Council report on all areas of significant progress and performance, annual service delivery plans were not prepared for 2015 and 2016 but a plan for 2017 was in course of preparation (not published on its website) and the 2015 Annual Report did not specifically report on implementation of the Corporate Plan. The 2016 Annual Report, however, which was in preparation at the time of the response, contained a comprehensive summary of objectives and progress up to 2017 for the Plan's 10 strategic objectives.

Finances

The Council's AFS was received late every year from 2013 to 2017, though there was an improvement in the number of weeks late in the case of the most recent 2016 AFS (received on 11/4/2017). That showed that during 2016 the Council cleared its cumulative end 2015 deficit

Louth County Council was the only authority where the audit opinion on the 2013 accounts was modified due to concerns as to the adequacy of the provision for bad debts. The specific findings of the LGAS Auditor were:

- The collection yields for rates at 56%, rents and annuities at 76%, housing loans at 48% and commercial water charges at 46% were all below the national average.
- The bad debt provision in respect of rates at 17.5% was not adequate and an additional charge in the region of €1.5m would be required to be made in the Income and Expenditure Account.
- The value of rent accounts in arrears for more than a year by end 2013 was €398,000 and the bad debt provision was €52,000, whereas the Auditor estimated a provision of about €318,000 to be required.
- Commercial water debt at end 2013 was €5.4m with a bad debt provision of €533,000, which the Auditor deemed inadequate based on the national average provision of 37% of commercial water debts.
- Fire charges debtors amounted to €1.2m, while receipts in 2013 were €73,000 – the poor collection yield indicated a bad debt provision of €1m was required whereas no provision was made.

The Council replied to NOAC's queries on its response to the audit concerns to the following effect:

- A Debt Collection Unit has been put in place within the Finance area of the Council. New procedures have been established to ensure that potential bad debts are identified earlier and it results in potential legal action taking place at an earlier stage than previously. The Council has participated in the Debt Management Project initiatives and, by 30 September 2015, had taken in €1.7m more than in the same period in 2014.
- The Council's Housing Section has established a dedicated team, based in Drogheda, to deal with Housing arrears and take responsibility for collecting rental income for the entire county. Rents collected to end September 2015 were €205,000 greater than in the first 9 months of 2014 while the collection of housing loan repayments showed a slight increase of €12,000 over the same period.
- The collection of fire income had recently been outsourced to a private debt collection agency but it was too early to establish the success or otherwise of this action.
- The Council was in the middle of the 2016 budgetary process during which it was intended to review the bad debt provision.

The Auditor's opinions of the AFSs in 2014 and 2015 were unmodified, although issues raised by the Auditor in the 2015 report included the €2.5m deficit on the general revenue balance, unsatisfactory collection yields and inadequate bad debts provision, unfunded balances in relation to land purchase, loans in respect of unsold affordable houses and costs relating to an aborted bridge project.

Income Collection

Rates –

2013

Collected 51% of the total due and 74% of the 2013 levied amount when the figures are re-stated to include the dissolved Town Councils; write-offs and waivers were €3.98m

2014

Collected 56% of the total due and 70% of the 2014 levied amount; write-offs and waivers were €15.046m

2015

Collected 60% of the total due and 77% of the levied amount; write-off and waivers were €0.93m and specific doubtful arrears were €836k.

According to the unaudited AFS, the 2016 collection yield was 68%, write offs were €2.2m and specific doubtful arrears were €1.9m.

Louth County Council had the lowest rates collection performance in each of the years 2013 to 2015. The national average rates collection yields in those three years were 75%, 77% and 83% of the total due. The apparent improvement in the 2014 yield was due to the substantial increase in write-offs that year and in fact, cash collection as a proportion of the annual levy reduced by 4% between 2013 and 2014.

Housing loans collection was at 69% in 2015 and 66% in 2014 and this performance was very near the median. The 2015 national average was 68.4% (67.4% in 2014) and only 7 authorities had a collection yield of 80% or more in 2015. The unaudited figure for Louth for 2016 is 73%.

Housing rents collection was at 82% in 2014, 73% in 2015 and was 71% in 2016 (unaudited). The national average in 2015 was 85%.



Public Spending Code

2014

While the Council confirmed that it published details on its website of its sole procurement in excess of €10m in 2014, it did not provide the required website link. The Council concluded overall that the QA process had provided reasonable assurance to the management of Louth County Council that the requirements of the PSC are being met.

2015

The required procurement link was provided. The QA review indicated satisfactory compliance with the PSC but recommended that the Council should carry out a formal PPR of all capital projects that exceed a certain threshold at a suitable time after the project has been completed and should introduce a standardised project life checklist to be filed and signed off.

2016

The QA report referred to a project in progress with a procurement value in excess of €10m and confirmed that this would be published on the Council website as soon as possible. However, as at November 2017, the only published procurement was advertised in 2013. The Internal Audit review found compliance with the Public Spending Code with some improvement necessary and recommended formal post project reviews of all capital projects that exceed a certain threshold, review of the completion of a project file checklist relating to Code requirements, documenting a standardised methodology/framework of the project/contract management principles to be used by staff and the provision of updated Public Spending Code training to relevant staff.

Performance Indicators

Overall, indicator comparative performance was not good in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

2014

Performance was good relative to other LAs for average housing re-letting cost and the vacancy rate, quality of private water supplies, the average time taken to mobilise the brigade to attend fires and the proportion of fires attended within 10 minutes. The latter results would have been helped by the fact that Louth has full time as well as retained fire-fighters. Performance was weaker relative to other authorities for inspections of rented accommodation, PSCI roads condition ratings, library visits, rates and rents collection and LEO job creation.

2015

In the case of the indicators relating to average re-letting cost and the vacancy rate, performance was again very good relative to other LAs and housing output was the 3rd highest per 1,000 population. Other relatively good performance indicators were those relating to the water quality of private schemes, pollution cases on hands at year end, the average time taken to mobilise the brigade to attend fires and the proportion of fires attended within 10 minutes. Performance on all the indicators relating to the PSCI ratings for roads was weak. None of the Council area was litter free, self-certified paid sick leave was high, rates and rent/annuities collection yield was low, the library visits were less than half the average, website page views less than a third the average and confirmation of planning decisions was low.

2016

Performance continued to be good for average social housing re-letting time and cost, the percentage of houses vacant at year end and the housing output per population. Performance was again weak relative to other authorities in relation to the proportion of regional roads ever surveyed, the level of gross littering, average library visits per population, medically certified paid sick leave and revenue collection yields.

The Council's response to NOAC's follow-up letter on the 2014 report indicated that the report was presented to the Audit Committee in July 2016 and subsequently to the elected members and that a process was being developed for annual reporting to the management team on the Council's performance benchmarked against the previous year's performance and that of comparable authorities. The indicators were being examined for suitability for targets.

The attached appendix contains the Louth results and the overall average or median for a number of the indicator outcomes for the last three years.

Housing

Private Rented Report

There were 6,166 registered tenancies in Louth at end 2015. Only 21 dwellings (0.4% of registered tenancies) were inspected in 2014 and this was the lowest inspection rate nationally. All of the inspected dwellings were not compliant with the Standards Regulations. The Council employs 0.327 of a whole-time equivalent staff per 1,000 tenancies, which is greater than the 0.23 average. The unit cost of inspections in 2014 was by far the highest at €775, but expenditure per registered tenancy at €3.31 was the 7th lowest. Unlike the majority of local authorities, the Council did issue 1 Prohibition Notice in 2014 and also issued 9 Improvement Notices with only 5 LAs issuing more. On a positive note, the Council was one of only nine LAs that provide tenants with a copy of the inspection report.

Management and Maintenance Report

In 2014 the Council had 3,934 dwellings of which 3,858 were houses and the remainder apartments. The Council's responses to the questionnaire issued for the report were particularly incomplete. Data not supplied included; the age breakdown differentiated between apartments and flats and for all dwellings, the number of estates owned by the Council, the number of dwellings situated in estates and the number in single rural locations, the nature of refurbishment work required on vacated units and details of re-letting works carried out by contractors, the breakdown of contractor expenditure on maintenance work into planned and response maintenance and improvement works and Departmental grants claimed in respect of improvement works.

Louth County Council had a low 1.5% vacancy rate at end 2014 and only 3 of the 58 vacant units had been unoccupied for more than a year. While the condition of the stock is not surveyed regularly, the Council advised that a survey was carried out in 2015 and that it had gone to tender for condition surveying work. The Council has energy rated 26% of its stock and 66% of those units had a rating of A, B or C. The rent received in 2014 was 146% of maintenance expenditure that year. Maintenance work is not subject to inspection. The Council has implemented choice-based lettings.

Tenant Survey

10 tenants of Louth County Council were included in the survey. 8 of them were satisfied with their neighbourhood and 7 with the structural condition of their houses and 6 of them agreed with the statement that 'my estate is a pleasant place to live'. 4 thought that the Council's services had improved over the last 5 years and half attributed this to issues being dealt with straightaway, while 3 thought that services had dis-improved over the same period due to cutbacks/understaffing. Of the 5 tenants who contacted the Council regarding emergency repairs, 2 said they were fixed within 72 hours and the other 3 said it took longer. 4 tenants said non-emergency repairs are sometimes carried out quickly and 5 that the repair work is good, while 2 said it is sometimes inspected. 2 tenants described the level of anti-social behaviour incidents as high and 4 have never complained about any aspect of their estate management and maintenance. 3 tenants agreed with the statement that they would be likely to praise the Council's housing service to family and friends.

Housing

Louth County Council has a housing stock of approximately 4,000 units and a housing list of 2,900 with approximately 1,500 on Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), who are effectively on the transfer list for Social Housing Units. Such a scale puts the county on a par with some of the smaller city authorities. Prior to Local Government reform and the legislative changes in 2014, both Dundalk Town Council and Drogheda Borough Council were Housing Authorities, as the two largest towns in the state.

The Corporate Plan 2014-2019 reflects on the significant housing needs of the County with the specific strategic objective to "*Facilitate sustainable communities through the provision of accommodation and supports that respond to the needs of all.*"

The Housing Department is therefore delivering high volume services in a much urbanised context. This, therefore, is reflected in a context of high levels of homelessness presentations and continued need to consider estate management issues in any decisions made. This is further evident in the above average concentrations of traveller community and non-Irish born population among our tenants and housing applicants.

The Council has been endeavouring to continually review its service provision to ensure best use of our service. Examples of same include the use of Choice Based Letting as an Allocation Model for new tenancies and the undertaking of a full condition survey of all stock in order to programme planned maintenance in an effective manner. The Council also has been proactive in considering disability matters and identified all housing needs in the county with a view to incorporating same into its various, construction, Part V and acquisition plans.

With a high demand for housing services, there is a continuous programme of increasing housing supply whether through Local Authority build, AHB provision, Social Leasing, Part V and CAS delivery. The Council manages a large land bank with considerable loan burden, which impacts on the funding of housing services. In addressing the supply matters, the Council has achieved success in meeting the targets set in National Policy documents such as Rebuilding Ireland. In the last two years in particular, the Council has piloted the use of CPOs¹ to acquire vacant housing and this is now recognised as a model that can be replicated across the country.

1 This practical and innovative use of the CPO process featured in the good practice event held by NOAC in association with the CCMA in Kilkenny Castle on 21 November 2017.

APPENDIX

	Performance Indicators	2016		2015		2014	
		Louth Data	Median/ Average	Louth Data	Median/ Average	Louth Data	Median/ Average
H1	Social Housing provided in year per 1,000 population	6.74	3.43	5.07	1.91	0.5	0.80
H2	% of directly provided dwellings vacant at 31/12	1.31	3.02	1.34	3.5	1.42	3.8
H3a	Average time from vacation date to PI year re-letting date (weeks)	16.63	32.99	22.56	29.46	25.83	31.43
H3b	Average cost expended on getting re-tenanted units ready for re-letting	€9,974.63	€15,877	€6,513.28	€13,378.40	€4,022.83	€11,534.91
H4	Average repair and maintenance cost per unit	€1,432.82	€1,500.23	€1,175.83	€1,292.57	€914.42	€1,272.30
H5	Inspections (Dwellings inspected in 2016) carried out in year as % of registrations	2.85	4.36	3.55	5.64	0.42	6.51
R1a	% Regional Road KM that ever received a PSCI rating	94	99	9	68	8.82	47.9
R1b	% Total Regional Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	31	30	1	20	8	11.15
R1c	% Total Primary Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	5	13	4	11	2	6.4
R1d	% Total Secondary Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	4	10	3	8	1	4.61
R1e	% Total Tertiary Road KM with a PSCI rating of 9-10	1	7	0	5	0	3.63
R2a	KM Regional Road strengthened using road improvement grants	4.8	10.8	4.9	10.2		
R2b	KM Regional road resealed using road maintenance grants	5.3	12.2	9.1	8.3		
R2/3	% Motor tax transactions performed online	60.82	64.05	52.59	56.6	47.42	54.7
W1	% private schemes with water quality in compliance	99.84	97.77	99.56	99.07	99.5	97.9
E1	% households availing of a 3-bin service	31.59	37.7	29.93	34.87	25.84	31.66
E2	Pollution cases on hand at year end as % of the cases that arose that year	2.57	9.91	2.87	8.49		
E3	% area unpolluted or litter free	0	13	0	14	4	9.5
P1	New buildings inspected as % of new buildings notified	12.42	19.42	27.47	24	18.8	17.71
P2	% of determinations that confirmed the decision made by LA	74.19	77.78	53.57	71.88	86.67	71.7
P3	Ratio of planning cases being investigated at year end as to cases closed	0.97	2.87	0.86	2.61	2.4	2.88
P4	Cost per capita of the Planning Service	€25.12	€26.96	€26.75	€26.76	€24.66	€25.27
F1	Cost per capita of Fire Service (based on 2011 Census for 2014 and 2015)	€52.61	€56.07	€51.84	€57.88	€50.9	€55.9
F2	Average time to mobilise Brigade re Fire (Minutes) (FT)	1.78	1.5	2.1	1.6	2.21	1.66
F3	% of Fire Cases in which first attendance is within 10 minutes	76.95	57.79	71.92	56.98	70.99	58.6
L1a	No. of Library visits per head of population	1.84	3.61	1.88	3.68	2.25	3.71
L1b	No. of Items borrowed per head of population	2.85	3.82	2.79	3.82		
L2	Cost of Library Service per capita	€22.58	€30.05	€25.14	€30.02	€22.26	€29.41
Y1	% of local schools involved in Comhairle na nÓg Scheme	66.67	68.07	88.89	67.59	66.67	51.86
C1	WTE staff per 1,000 population	4.63	5.64	4.61	5.58	4.7	5.63
C2a	% of paid working days lost to medically certified sick leave in year	3.63	3.76	3.83	3.52	3.71	3.34
C2b	% of paid working days lost to self-certified sick leave in year	0.71	0.38	0.61	0.39	0.52	0.4
C3	LA website page views per 1,000 population	7,809	12,422	3,189	11,666	N/A	9,651
C4	Overall cost of ICT Provision per WTE	€2,935.61	€2,675.69	€2,584.51	€2,680.15	€2,495	€2,646.8
M2a	% Commercial Rates Collected in year	68	84	60	83	56	77
M2b	% Rent & Annuities Collected in year	71	85	73	85	82	84
M2c	% Housing Loans Collected in year	73	71	69	68	66	67
J1	LEO jobs output per 1,000 population	0.6	0.7	0.5	0.66	0.35	0.73



Stage 1 meeting

NOAC profile meeting with Louth County Council

Date:	30 August 2017	
Venue:	County Hall, Dundalk	
Attendees:	Louth County Council <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Joan Martin, Chief Executive ■ Paddy Donnelly ■ Bernie Woods ■ Joe McGuinness Four rate collectors also in attendance	NOAC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Pat McLoughlin, Chair ■ Sheila McMahon

Pat McLoughlin referred to the outline he had given at the CCMA meeting at which Joan Martin was present and explained that the profiles were being prepared based on the data accumulated for the purpose of NOAC reports published to date. In order to broaden the NOAC members' understanding of the work of the local authorities and the individual priorities and pressures they faced and to put the information in context, NOAC wanted to get the background context from the authorities and any other datasets that the councils consider should also be taken into account. NOAC is open as to how to present the information, for example, grouping a number of authorities together. The overall objective is to work to improve performance and to share what might help to achieve that.

The Council had prepared a presentation focusing mainly on the overall revenue position, rates collection and housing rents.

Joan Martin outlined that Louth was unusual as a rural authority in having two large urban centres that accounted for more than half the population, so that the borough and district councils that existed prior to the 2014 reforms were responsible for more of the population than the County Council. The impact of the economic recession on the rates base had been compounded by the development of a resistance by some solvent businesses to paying any charges on foot of the national water charges protests. Dundalk's businesses were vulnerable to sterling changes as it is a border town and the recent drop in sterling could again increase the number of vacant properties. Vigorous pursuit of outstanding rates arrears from businesses that were experiencing difficulties was sometimes difficult to reconcile with the Council's growing economic development role whereby it was trying to help businesses to keep going. Prior to the recession, rates collection yields were at 90%.

The rates base is primarily small businesses and many of these bought property via their one person occupational pension schemes before the recession that then needed to be funded from the businesses when property crashed. The Council recognised that the yield needed to be brought back up and the considerable efforts being put into this were outlined. The cash being collected has increased to €28m and over 1,000 payers are on payment plans. The fact that the local authority is not a primary creditor does not help and initiating Court proceedings has little or no impact where several judgement mortgages are already in place. The Council only gives a 50% refund on vacant properties and the impending legislation to extend the Revenue sheriff powers will be useful.

The Council's cumulative deficit on its income and expenditure account was cleared in 2016 by releasing the accumulated reserves as well as the €250,000 annual expenditure savings that commenced in 2015. The Council had focussed on protecting core services since the recession, despite the drop in its LGF allocation from €25m in 2008 to less than €9m in 2017 and the decimation of the roads budgets.

Louth has a large social housing need with inter-generational unemployment and social problems and the waiting period is now 8 to 10 years for a house. Homelessness is a growing issue and the Council deals with about 150 homeless individuals on any given night. There are about 7,000 private tenancies in the county and they deal with a high level of demand for houses rather than halting sites for travellers. Amalgamation of the 3 housing authorities had resulted in 58 written policies and procedures that include governance and sign-off of each housing decision.

The Council undertook a rent review in 2015 that uncovered a lot of undeclared income and resulted in a retrospective increase being applied to a large number of tenant files. About €2m of the outstanding arrears at March 2017 of €4.77m relates to the rent reviews. Pursuing the arrears is very labour intensive for the council staff. The nature of the issue means that arrears get out of control very quickly and the Council is of the view that deduction at source should be mandatory. While 1,500 of tenants are in payment plans, a thousand have broken those plans. The application of choice based lettings has virtually eliminated refusals of accommodation offers, they have 80% completed a comprehensive condition survey of all of their stock and they have increased the level of private rented inspections in 2017. The Council's housing loan collection rate improved to 93% for Q1 of 2017 and the arrears cases are being dealt with mainly through the Mortgage to Rent scheme.

Joan Martin acknowledged that the information compiled from the NOAC reports to date was all factually correct but was anxious that the presentation should include the positives also, such as the effort being put into tourism development. Pat McLoughlin reiterated that NOAC is open to starting the profiles with material from the authority setting out the context of their operations and including any other evidence based data such as material that may be compiled for councillors. He outlined the areas of interest to the NOAC members, including customer service for rates payers and quality of information provision to the public that the members would probably like to discuss with the Chief Executive when she meets with NOAC. It was agreed that the Council would provide, before the end of September, a narrative for incorporation in the next draft of the profile and NOAC will meet with the Chief Executive subsequent to that.



3

Stage 1 Presentation



Your Council
for Your
Community



Comhairle Contae Lú
Louth County Council

NOAC Briefing

Wednesday, 30th August 2017



Comhairle Contae Lú
Louth County Council

FINANCE





Comhairle Contae Lú
Louth County Council

Annual Financial Statements – Year on Year

Annual Financial Statements

Year	Overall Surplus / (Deficit) for the Year	General Reserve at 31 st December
2016	€2,510,887*	€1.00
2015	€ 96,574	(€2,510,887)
2014	(€4,049,990)	(€2,607,460)
2013	(€2,609,699)	€1,442,529

* Note: 2016 includes a transfer from Specific Reserves of €2,255,952 but Operational Surplus was €254,935.

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Government Funding – Year on Year

Government Funding

Year	Local Government Fund	Pension Levy	NPPR	Less LPT Paid for Local Authority Houses	Total Government Funding	(Reduction)/ Increase on Previous Year	(Reduction) / Increase on 2012
2012	€15,605,720	€1,732,359	€1,480,062	(€0)	€18,818,141		
2013	€15,548,027	€1,725,406	€1,984,792	(€169,830)	€19,088,395	€270,254	€270,254
2014	€8,243,835	€1,622,363	€2,079,432	(€388,647)	€11,556,983	(€7,531,412)	(€7,261,158)
2015	€8,098,323	€1,561,064	€1,280,188	(€349,687)	€10,589,888	(€967,095)	(€8,228,253)
2016	€8,106,153	€2,131,640	€975,989	(€331,886)	€9,881,896	(€707,992)	(€8,936,245)

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RATES



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Targets – Year on Year

% Increase in Collection Rates

Year	Closing Balance	% Collection	% increase on 2014
2016	€14,748,857	68%	21%
2015	€17,649,245	60%	7%
2014	€18,376,977	56%	

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Cash Collection - Year on Year

Cash collection target of 10% increase on prior year

Year	Cash Collected	Increase in year	% increase on PY
2016	€28,022,706*	€2,444,704	9.55%
2015	€25,578,002	€2,163,771	9.2%
2014	€23,414,231		

* Includes loss of income for Globals and Irish Water- €842k

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Rates – Closing Balance Year on Year

Reduction in Closing Balance

Year	Closing Balance	Decrease in year	% Decrease on 2014
2016	€14,748,857	€2,900,388	20%
2015	€17,649,245	€727,732	4%
2014	€18,376,977		

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Bad Debts Provision

Bad Debts as % of Closing Debtors

2016	47%
2015	35%
2014	33%

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Rates Financial Data

Balance as at	30/06/2017	30/06/2016	30/06/2015	30/06/2014
Opening balance	€14,747,818	€17,648,195	18,376,977	23,542,325
Accrual	€31,838,325	€32,234,632	33,136,710	33,309,305
Receipts *	(€14,512,490)	(€13,197,931)	(10,632,343)	(11,191,079)
Write off's (to date)	(€638,758)	(€3,121,928)	(1,778,616)	(798,417)
Closing balance	€31,434,895	€33,562,968	39,102,727	44,862,135
% collection	31.6%	28.2%	21%	20%
% increase in Cash on prior year	€1.3m - 10%			

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Improvements introduced (1)

- **Centralised** in 2014 as part of the unification of Towns and Borough
- Appropriate Debt Collection **staffing structure** put in place
 - Very clear roles and responsibilities for each member of the Debt Collection Team
- **Annual targets set by Management Team**
- **Monthly report** produced tracking
 - Annual Targets
 - Cash Collected per collector
 - Payment plan movements etc.
- **Monthly meetings with Debt Collection Team**
 - Review targets
 - Set the priorities for the month.
- **Quarterly presentation to Management Team**

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Improvements introduced (2)

- **Louth Pilot for National Debt Management** project
 - Training given to collectors
 - Advised us to phone all non paying debtors between Jan – July
 - Produced a best practice guide for Local Authorities
- **Rate demand issued earlier**
 - 2017 – Jan, 2016 – Feb, 2015 - Mar
- **Reduced admin work carried out by Collectors to increase focus on cash collection.** Grouping set up to deal with:
 - Receivers and liquidators
 - Legal files
 - Vacancy follow up
 - Tracking of Payment plan customers

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Improvements introduced (3)

- Liaised with the provider of our Debt Management **software** to:
 - Improve usability
 - Automate all correspondence
 - Legal module
 - Increase the number of reminders
- Liaised with Legal Advisors to **streamline documents needed for legal process**

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Reminders & Notices

	2017 To June	2016 Full year	2015 Full Year
1 st Reminder Issued	1994	2442	2142
2 nd Reminders Issued	1558	1870	1927
3 rd Reminders Issued	49	1496	
6 Day notice Issued - 2016	325	424	
6 Day notice Issued – 2015+ prior		652	1053

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Receivers/Liquidations

	No
Total files	142
Accounts that have been settled	8
Dissolved - no funds	46
In progress	88
Receipts between Jan – June €21,588 Liquidations & €101,255 Receiverships	

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Legal Files

	No
Legal files in progress – Up to Judgement Stage includes 120 in payment plans	483
Files at Judgement stage	76
Files with Sheriff	11
Payment plans after Judgement stage	22
Instalment orders	2
Application for instalment orders	2
Application for Judgement mortgage	3
Judgement Mortgage	6
Legal files closed as they are paid etc	444

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Rates – Focus in 2017

- Achieve targets set by Management Team
- Increase no of customers on payment plans - monitored monthly
- All Customer in arrears to be contacted by phone before July.
- All “Gone away/whereabouts unknown” accounts to be investigated
- All 6 Day notices to be issued by Mid September where possible

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HOUSING



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Louth County Council – Housing in perspective

- **4007** Dwellings
- **770** Dwellings through AHBs
- **2465** Housing Applicants
- **1652** HAP Client Households

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Context

- Local Government Reform Act, 2014 – **Amalgamation** of Three former Housing Authorities
- Documentation of **Procedures**
 - Currently **58** written policies/procedures
 - Implementation audited by **Internal Audit**
- Decision to undertake a **Rent Review** – 2015
 - Many **legacy issues**, including around legal interpretation
 - High levels of **Undeclared Income** (and again in recent review)
 - Larger weekly accrual

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High Demand Areas

- **Homelessness – 150 individuals any night**
 - Emergency Accommodation
 - Dedicated Housing Stock
 - Tenancy Sustainment
- **Traveller Demands**
 - High level of demand for houses rather than halting sites
- **Private Rented Pressures – 7000 tenancies**

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Service Improvements

- **Choice Based Lettings**
 - Pilot from early 2016, now covers **all lettings**
 - Full ICT package – 800 website viewings weekly and 100 expressions of interest per property
- **Conditional Survey of Stock**
 - Procured late 2016 – 80% complete
- **Private Rented Inspections**
 - Many Improvement Notices in place
 - 41 Prohibition Notices
 - Significant improvement in standards

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Rent Arrears

Month	Arrears	Collection Rate	At Year End
March 2017	€4,771,408	37%	76% - Target
March 2016	€3,525,883	42%	71%
March 2015	€2,051,665	53%	73%

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Differential Rents – Arrears Breakdown

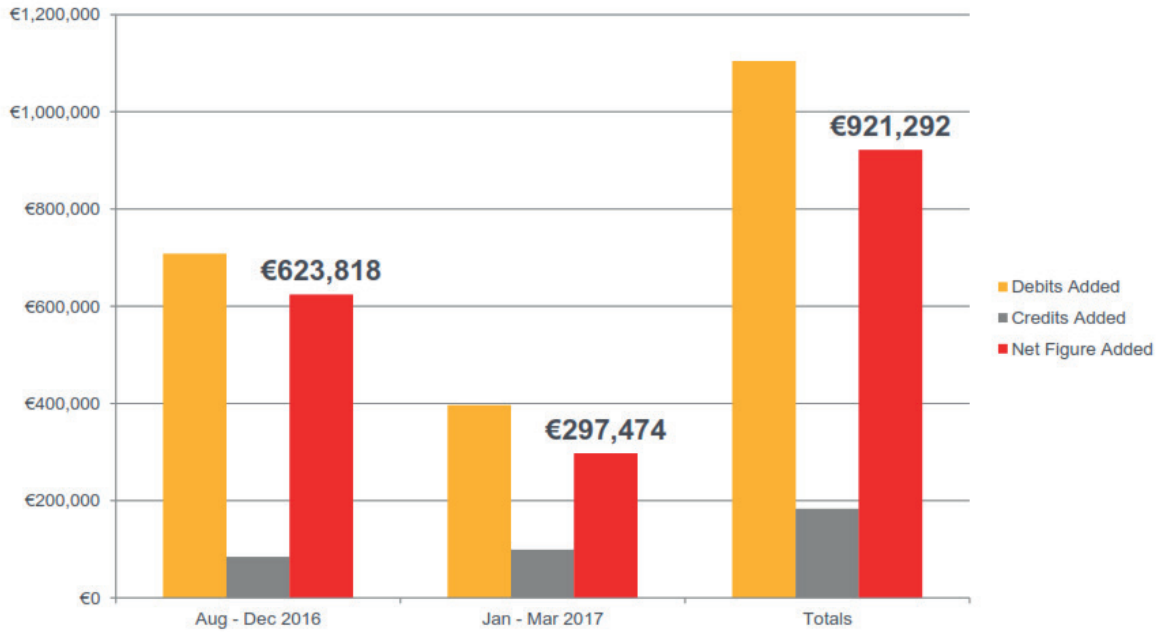
Amount in Arrears	No of Accounts	Total Arrears
€30,000+	1	€30,670
€20,000 - €29,999	9	€214,501
€15,000 - €19,999	18	€311,317
€10,000 - €14,999	37	€444,929
€5,000 - €9,999	159	€1,099,114
€1,000 - €4,999	756	€1,803,393
€100 - €999	880	€380,076
€>€100	142	€10,109

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Increase in Arrears due to Rent Reviews



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Arrears Action Jan – Mar 2017

1,269 Letters Issued Jan – March 2017

Letter 1	219
Letter 2	54
Letter 3	28
Adhoc	968
Tenancy Warning	1
Arranged Meetings	200+ across the county
Home Visits	15
Statements	540

> **1,548 tenants are in a payment plan, 481 unbroken**

> **Top 12 arrears: €288,177**

Caused mainly by undeclared income & poor payment records

6 in a payment plan
3 on a penalty rent

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Housing Loans

Date	Arrears	Collection Rate
Qtr 1 2017		93%
31 st Dec 16	€352,000	73%
31 st Dec 15	€434,439	69%
31 st Dec 14	€442,579	66%

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Thank You
Go raibh maith agat

Contact
1890 202 303
info@louthcoco.ie



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County Hall
Millennium Centre
St Alphonsus Road
Dundalk
A91 KFW6

Townhall
Crowe Street
Dundalk
County Louth
A91 W20C

Civic Centre
Fair Street
Drogheda
County Louth
A92 P440

Mid Louth Civic Services Centre
Fair Green
Ardee
County Louth
A92 RYT2



Stage 2 meeting

National Oversight and Audit Commission Meeting with Louth County Council

Date:	19 th December 2017	
Venue:	Conference Room, Custom House, Dublin 1	
Attendees:	<p>Members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ John Buckley ▪ Tara Buckley ▪ Connie Hanniffy ▪ David Holohan ▪ Paul Lemass ▪ Michael McGreal ▪ Martina Moloney ▪ Sharon O'Connor ▪ Colleen Savage 	<p>Secretariat</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sheila McMahon ▪ Claire Gavin ▪ Diarmuid O'Leary <p>Louth County Council</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Joan Martin, Chief Executive ▪ Paddy Donnelly, Director of Service ▪ Joe McGuinness, Director of Service ▪ Emer O'Gorman, Director of Service ▪ Frank Pentony, Director of Service ▪ Bernie Woods, Director of Service

The chair welcomed the Chief Executive and her management team to the meeting and indicated that the draft profile for Louth would be revised as appropriate subsequent to the meeting and forwarded to her for comments.

The Chief Executive's introductory remarks addressed Louth County Council's position on the league table in relation to some of the items included in the profile. In particular, she stated that the Council's rates collection performance reflects the continuing fallout in Co. Louth from the recent recession. She added that the drive to improve the Council's financial position has dominated her tenure as Chief Executive.



Performance Indicators

The Council reviews its performance indicator outcomes against the average rather than a selection of local authorities. Councillors are not specifically briefed on indicator performance but the Audit Committee reviews the published indicator figures. In response to a query about the Council's impressive re-letting performance, Joe McGuinness indicated that considerable resources have been allocated to reducing the average re-letting time, which now stands at 10 weeks. This is however still not quick enough given the extent of the housing need in the county. Choice based lettings have also helped hugely by eliminating vacant periods associated with waiting for offers to be accepted. Lettings in Louth are all choice-based now, apart from disabled units. When asked his opinion as to the adequacy of the systems for recording housing data, he indicated that they are only as good as the quality and consistency of the data input allows. The i-house system is also nearing the end of its life. After the 2014 local government restructuring, the data on the Town and Borough Councils' systems had to be cleansed and merged, which has had an impact on the quality of housing data available. The low level of library usage was also discussed and the Chief Executive outlined the many active initiatives being taken by the library service to promote usage, including a 5 for 1 library card allowing access to all the Council and Dundalk Institute of Technology libraries. She suggested there is a correlation between the level of social disadvantage in Louth and library usage. The quality of library services provided is not in question.

Housing Functions

NOAC sought an update on the current level of inspections of accommodation in the private rented sector and Joe McGuinness advised that additional resources had been allocated to this function in 2016 in the form of two inspections staff and an administrator. A checklist has been created, tabulating the various requirements of the applicable regulations for use in the inspections. The non-compliance rate is still 100% and all non-compliant cases are being issued Improvement Notices, with Prohibition Notices used in the more serious cases. Inspections of units owned by Approved Housing Bodies have now commenced and these are being carried out by outsourced staff. The current priority for Louth is to conduct inspections required under the Housing Assistance Payment scheme, followed by instances of complaints or where the Council has reason to believe a unit might not be compliant. Joe McGuinness also provided a brief update on the CPO (Compulsory Purchase Order) initiative – 53 houses have now been acquired with 40 more going through the system, 24 of the houses are tenanted, the purchase prices paid have ranged from €5,000 to €160,000, a design team oversees the refurbishment work which is all outsourced, any single storey acquisitions are more expensively adapted for disability use, and the process from the beginning up to tenant allocation takes 9-10 months. An impact of the initiative noted by the Council is that some owners of these types of vacant properties have been motivated to bring them back into productive use themselves, preempting the property becoming the subject of a CPO by the Council.

Economic and Community Development and Tourism

The Chief Executive described the Louth Economic Forum multi-stakeholder task force, which pre-dated the introduction of the Local Enterprise Office (LEO). All the agencies are intermeshed and work across all boundaries so that if an opportunity arises, the Forum can act quickly. The Forum's action plan reflects the priorities of the LEO, Local Economic Community Plan and IDA. Louth and Meath County Councils jointly appointed a Boyne Valley Tourism Officer to promote the region, which is part of the Ireland's Ancient East initiative and it is intended to work with Newry Mourne and Down District Council on this initiative also.

Joe McGuinness advised that the level of active participation in the Public Participation Network structures is adequate, but that it can be a struggle to get nominations for membership of various committees and to keep the nominees at the table.

Frank Pentony explained that a shopfront grant was introduced because new businesses taking over vacant premises were having difficulty getting funding from the banks for the fit-out costs. A rates incentive is also available to new retail businesses occupying premises that have been vacant for two years of a 50% reduction on the first year and 25% reduction on the second year rates bills. This has been somewhat successful with 15-20 premises no longer vacant.

The retail sector in Dundalk is linked to how the sector is performing in Newry; Dundalk tends to suffer when Newry is doing well, as is currently the situation. In terms of employment, many of the current jobs in the county are lower-skilled in areas such as call centres (over 2,000 jobs) and financial payments. NOAC members were advised that the county has a high level of intergenerational unemployment and the Council's focus is on improving qualifications and skills, particularly of the long-term unemployed. The Chief Executive summarised her economic development vision for Louth as to maximise the number of jobs through inward investment and business start-ups, and to maximise the potential of the county's location on the Dublin - Belfast economic corridor.

Finances

There was a lengthy discussion about the Council's rates collection performance. The Council regards the solution to the problem as ensuring that all rates arrears are paid and all vacant premises occupied. It operates a 50% vacancy refund rate and offers up to 10% reduction on rates bills paid on time (up to a maximum of €300 per customer). A particular challenge is to ensure that liquidators and receivers of businesses with vacant properties pay rates owed. The collection rate was over 90 per cent in Dundalk and Drogheda in the past. It was suggested that an element of 'won't pay' as well as 'can't pay' developed following the recession, which was influenced by, for example, the water charge protests. The Council has strengthened considerably its efforts with a hand-picked debt collection team that hopes to achieve a collection rate of close to 75% in 2017 on the back of a detailed process of targeted measures, including quicker issuing of bills and prompt follow-up of 7-day notices. Bernie Woods advised that the arrears were incurred over a 10-year period and many of these customers are in payment plans to pay the arrears over 3-4 years. There is also an issue regarding outstanding valuations by the Valuation Office.

In relation to the adequacy of the bad debt provisioning that was raised in the audit reports, the Chief Executive said she hopes the 2017 provision of €6m is adequate. She hopes also that the amount can be reduced for 2018 as there is no additional funding that can be made available for this purpose, without making cuts from areas such as community supports. It had been hoped that the Local Property Tax would provide a robust income source but the absence of revaluations has prevented this and the Council is a net recipient with an allocation from the Local Government Fund of €9m. While the LPT percentage rate has not been reduced, the Councillors were not persuaded to increase the rate either. The Chief Executive expressed on-going concern regarding cash-flow and about the Council's financial position in the immediate future. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is cutting the road grant allocations for 2018 and additional unfunded costs are arising from the rollback of the

FEMPI legislation and an agreement applying to fire service personnel. The Council clarified the position regarding unfunded balances as being 70-75% related to timing of the funding of housing and roads schemes by the relevant Government Departments. Some unfunded balances have been written off, of which about €5m was funded by Revenue Account transfers.

The Council is carrying €64m in land bank loans, the repayments on which have been interest only up to now, but repayment of the principal will commence within the next couple of years. A large site in Drogheda bought about 10 years ago at a unit cost of about €130,000 has been the subject of applications to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government that have not been approved due to exceeding the unit cost ceiling. The Council is now looking for the Department to pay the charges relating to this loan because the internal capital receipts have been largely used up and will be insufficient from next year. Some land purchased during the boom was sold to the Department of Education and Skills at a loss.

Customer Service

The Chief Executive indicated that it has been a while since a customer survey was carried out by the Council. An exercise in getting citizen input into the budgetary process was undertaken a few years ago that involved an on-line survey and corporate services staff carrying out surveys at shopping centres. These indicated that the services that people did not want to see cut were 'softer' services such as parks and recreation and the fire service. Issues that people are interested in include tourism, littering and quality of life. Emer O'Gorman referred to the Council's very active Twitter account and redesigned website as a means of greater customer engagement. The Council has dedicated customer service centres in each of its buildings and about 20 staff are involved fulltime in customer services with rotating periods between the public counter and answering phones. The Council's outsourced 24 hour emergency service passes on to customer services any non-emergency calls received, so these can be followed up during normal working hours. On customer satisfaction generally, the Chief Executive felt that their customers would probably be reasonably happy but that the Council could do more in areas such as social media usage, technology and increased service hours.

Corporate Plan

In relation to the Corporate Planning requirements, Emer O'Gorman indicated that the Council was not in a position to prepare the Annual Service Delivery Plan for 2017 but would prepare one for 2018 early next year. The main areas of the Corporate Plan feed into the operational plans of the service directorates. The Council is monitoring the achievement of the Corporate Plan objectives more closely now and included a comprehensive progress report in its 2016 Annual Report for the first time. The Chief Executive is happy with progress in implementing the economic development, tourism and community initiative elements of the Corporate Plan, which have helped to improve the county at a time of constrained financial resources. She referenced the myriad plans now applicable, including the LECP and action plans for jobs, tourism, rural Ireland and broadband, and indicated that the challenge was to keep all these plan elements consistent. This has resulted in the monthly management reports to Councillors now running to 50 pages. In relation to the corporate planning implications of Brexit, the Chief Executive referenced the October 2017 report by the University of Ulster that was commissioned by the 11 border authorities. This report deals with the key implications in relation to the movement of people, the loss of Peace/Interreg funding and the opportunities associated with relocation of businesses for continued access to the EU.

Restructuring

When asked about the positives and negatives of the 2014 restructuring, the Chief Executive outlined the implications of the abolition of Dundalk Town Council and Drogheda Borough Council. As a result of the economic recession and the need to reduce staff costs, some services had already been centralised so the Council was part way there by 2014. All of the Council offices had been retained and staff were able to continue in their existing locations, apart from Directors of Service posts, which had all been moved to Dundalk. The merging of the finances and the various IT systems in use was a major task that is still being completed. This has however been beneficial and has brought a welcome consistency. From an administrative and corporate perspective, the reforms have worked well. However it would also be true to say acceptance of the changes has been more difficult in Drogheda, in particular.

Town Centre Health Check

A NOAC member raised the Town Centre Health Check initiative with the Chief Executive on the premise that towns, like Tralee, which engaged early with this initiative, have had major benefits and it could be beneficial to Dundalk and Drogheda. The Chief Executive mentioned that this had come up in a recent discussion with an official from Queen's University and that she would take on board the suggestion to participate in the initiative. She advised that Louth has been very active in the Tidy Towns competition for many years with 10 gold medals achieved to date, while Dundalk has a Business Improvement District company, which reports back to the local authority. Some elements of Drogheda's involvement in RTE's 2011 Local Heroes project were still in place and used in the Council's successful bid to host the Fleadh Cheoil event in August 2018.

Conclusion

The Chief Executive feels much has been achieved, in particular in the areas of economic development, infrastructure, quality of life and community development. The Council has learned to survive with a lot less money. Areas where there was no progress are a target for the future. Some infrastructure projects did not proceed to date but with the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund there is now scope to do more and to work differently with a cross agency approach to some projects.

The chair thanked the Chief Executive and her team for meeting with NOAC and for providing the members with an insight into the work of the County Council from their perspective.



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