

Kerry County Council – NOAC
26th June 2025

Miriam McDonald: Okay, good morning, everybody, and thank you very much for coming here to meet us today and we appreciate the early start that you've all had and thank you. My name is Miriam McDonald and I'm a board member of NOAC and will be chair for today. So, the proceedings are really; I'll ask my other board members and the secretariat to introduce themselves. If you can then introduce yourselves, just for the record. Um, and then I'll say a few words. I'll hand over to yourself, Fearghal, to say a few words. And then, um, we have different working groups on the NOAC board, so the working group members will then ask different questions and we'll take it from there. We expect it to last around an hour and a half to two hours, depending on the discussion. So, thank you all very much. So, as I said, my name is Miriam McDonald. If we go from the end, Ciarán.

Ciarán Hayes: Ciarán Hayes, board member.

Noel Harrington: Noel Harrington, board member.

Declan Breathnach: Declan Breathnach, board member.

Margaret Lane: Margaret Lane, board member.

Claire Gavin: Claire Gavin, secretariat.

John Byrne: John Byrne, board member.

John Goldrick: John Goldrick, secretariat member.

Alan McDermott: Alan McDermott, secretariat.

Fearghal Reidy: Fearghal Reidy, Chief Executive.

Christy O'Connor: Christy O'Connor, Director of Corporate Services.

Kathleen Moriarty: Kathleen Moriarty, SEO in Finance and Corporate Performance.

James Nolan: James Nolan, Director of Services Planning, Environment and Emergency Services.

John Kennelly: John Kennelly, Director of Services, Housing Integration and Water Services

Frank Hartnett: Frank Hartnett, Director of Roads and Transportation.

Niamh O' Sullivan: Niamh O' Sullivan, Director of Economic and Community Development.

Angela McAllen: Angela McAllen, Director of Finance.

Miriam McDonald: Thank you very much. Just a little bit about NOAC. To start, as you know, we're the National Oversight and Audit Commission. We're the national oversight body for local government in Ireland, established under the Local Government Reform Act in 2014. And our function is to carry out oversight of local authority activities, scrutinising performance, particularly financial performance. But we also support best practice and some of you will have been at our best practice day and our customer service best practice days. We support implementation of national government policy, corporate plan service level agreements and general local government reform. But the core function is to review individual activities and performance of local authorities and that's why we're here today. And we started the first cycle of this way back in 2017 and met all of the local authorities and produced 32 different reports on that. And it gave a good view to the public and to all the various stakeholders of how local government was performing in Ireland and what was good and what needed improvement so I hope that process will continue. But we came to the end of that first cycle, and we obviously reviewed that and looked at how things had gone, and we decided to implement some changes, and this meeting today is part of that, you're the third group under the new implementation of scrutiny. So, thank you for coming and we hope that we'll have a good discussion today. So I'll hand over to yourself, Fearghal, now for your opening address.

Fearghal Reidy: Thank you. Thanks to the commission for having us here today. We're very glad to participate in this. As you know, Kerry County Council is delivering a very broad range of services to communities, residents, businesses and visitors in a very urban, near and remote county. So, it affects how we operate and our operational plans. Now I want to address some of the key priorities and challenges that Clipper Board say as part of the introduction.

So, first of all, housing. We manage a housing stock of 4,526 units. The vacancy rate in 2024 was 2.76, which is low, but our turnaround time in 2024 was 61.5 weeks. And we accept that this is an outlier ~~that~~ and needs to be addressed. In the meantime, we also have a target to deliver 1,536 units in the period 2022 to 26. Our current approval, we have 1,211. That's an update to see this report and we're actively identifying methods to bridge that gap so we can address that. We're also playing a role in broader housing delivery. We're currently going through variation of our development plan to ensure there's more zoned land for housing and economic development and actively working with landowners and with agencies like the LDA, HISCO and so forth to bring forward development plans.

Second priority is environment and climate action, with the coastline of 886 kilometres and towns and villages throughout the county that are experiencing the effects of significant weather events. We're actively working with the OPW and other partners to implement CFRAMS and other measures to protect our communities from climate change. In addition, we're working with communities to address climate mitigation, so the decarbonising zone in Dingle is very active in advancing projects to pilot across the rest of the county and hopefully across the country.

Another key priority of ours is connectivity, as a county seen to be both remote and rural, and connectivity is essential. In that regard, we're working very hard with TII and the Department of Transport, in particular on the N22 Cork-Kerry corridor, as the Taoiseach had commented, but also which, in our case, is the Farranfore Killarney bypass scheme is a key priority. And we have to work then on the other national and primary and secondary routes, along with the local roads in that. We're also implementing a programme of work on active travel and road safety across the county.

And while we're responsible for a number of key piers and harbours across the county there are, the main one that we have to take care of, if you like, is Fenit, because from Fenit we have international shipping. So, we're actively working on that and preparing a strategy for that. In addition, we're working with partners in Kerry Airport, Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann and Local Link to enable connectivity to the county and within the county and figures on public transport around price in that regard.

Another priority for us is community economic development. Kerry has welcomed almost 10,000 Ukrainians, which is a testament to the strength of community in Kerry and we'll continue to strengthen communities through the LCDC and various committees and one-to-one with the communities. In relation to economic development, Kerry is obviously known for tourism and we are implementing five destination plans that have been prepared by Fáilte Ireland in the area of sustainable tourism, in particular shifting more towards that sustainable tourism model and developing the tourism strategy for the remainder of the county. We also need to diversify the economy and create opportunities in other sectors and we're very strong in that you see the growth in other sectors is quite strong over the last inter census period and certainly working with partners to enhance the enterprise and the system of the county.

Key thing that Kerry County Council has is a shared national shared service for procurement in that we provide procurement services for minor works and plant hire civils and an approximate 600 million was procured through that. We have about 2,500 suppliers on that, which shows an emphasis on SMEs as well and supporting SMEs through procurement across Ireland. And so, we want to make sure we have an organisation that's fit for purpose - another key priority of ours. We've adopted a five-year plan, corporate plan and now we're working on reviewing our workforce plan, our

operational plans, our PMDSs and our PDPs so that our organisation is fit for purpose, and so I look forward to getting into more detail on these priorities with the commission.

Miriam McDonald: Thank you very much, Chair. Ok, we may come back to some points in your address. Thank you, Maybe I'll hand over to oh sorry, Declan.

Declan Breathnach: Thanks for your opening remarks, Miriam, Welcome here, I obviously think, on behalf of WG1, that social questions are related to corporate plans. So in the corporate plan 2019 to 2024, and 2025 to 2029 you refer several times to human rights and equality issues. Can you tell us whether Kerry has undertaken a formal assessment of human rights and equality issues for the 2025 and 2029 corporate plan.

Christy O'Connor: Yes, we have carried out a formal assessment and we have four elements to that. There's an assessment of issues, the evidence book, a value statement and implementation plan for the period 2025 to 2029. So, it's at the final stages of sign off following the adoption of the corporate plan and translation to Irish, and so that's ready for inclusion.

Declan Breathnach: Thank, you, Thank you. Can you tell us about any critical targets that were not met in the most recent corporate plans and why? What workarounds you might have developed to avoid such issues in the future?

Christy O'Connor: I suppose in our corporate plan we have carried out a full assessment of, you know, the corporate plan covers the broad range of areas that we work at. So, the corporate plan covers each of the directorates and under each directorate then there would be, I suppose, a variety of issues which would be brought forward or carried forward.

Fearghal Reidy: I think the key one would be in the area of housing. It's something we, want to tackle but we are tackling very seriously. So, I think the turnaround times in particular and to delivery of our housing targets, is something that we are focusing on and addressing.

Declan Breathnach: And lastly, my last question. In terms of your staffing resources, what initiatives and we've come across this, this right across the country, as I'm sure you're aware what initiatives does the council have or might put in place to help attract staff, to retain staff and to speed up the process when you need really good staff?

Fearghal Reidy: Staff retention is becoming a bit of an issue alright, and there is a revolving door, particularly around the technical skills, but broadly as well around the administrative grades as well, and a few things. First of all, we do promote the county's quality of life, and I know that sounds a bit, as it actually is, a big attractor to working with Kerry County Council, which is a secure job in an area with an excellent quality of life. The second is, we're putting now in place, we're finalising a work well-being strategy that

we will promote and we're also putting in place a communications plan on the wings of the local authorities so that you could appeal broader, to broader society and therefore hopefully attract more staff.

Declan Breathnach: Thank you. Anybody else no, so I'll hand you over to Miriam?

Miriam McDonald: Sorry, I was just wondering. Are there particular skills that I'm thinking like? For example, I know in some local authorities, planners are a big issue. Are there particular skills that are posing challenges for you?

Fearghal Reidy: I think in our case it's IT and finance in particular. We do attract planners, obviously there's a churn there, but it's not as much as the urban areas, but IT and finance, I would say, but also general opportunities in the public sector as well, and opportunities for promotion.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah, yeah, yeah okay, I mean I know, I know some other local authorities have tried to develop developmental pathways. Is that for staff to try and kind of, because

Fearghal Reidy: Yeah, that's, I mentioned earlier about the corporate plan and the putting in place of PMDS is really important to that. So, we're reviewing the format of the PMDS and within that is an emphasis, strong emphasis on training, education and development, so that they can see that and we are, in 26, putting more money aside then for that training and development of staff. It's really critical.

Miriam McDonald: Thank you. Hey, sorry, Ciarán.

Ciarán Hayes: Thank you and just failté romhat, you're very welcome and I congratulated you Fearghal privately and formally on your appointment. We wish you the very best over the coming years. All the problems are yours now.

Fearghal Reidy: Fair enough.

Ciarán Hayes: Just to continue, on that particular point, Chair. While there's a difficulty at the moment in terms of recruitment and retention for existing skill sets, I'm just conscious that within the sector there's a growing need for new skill sets, particularly in the IT area, particularly in the area of AI and how that's going to be applied to the various different services, and particularly in the area of energy management and energy efficiency, climate and so on. So, it's just to be conscious of that will compound the existing problems you have with regards to retention. Can I come back to a number of points that you mentioned in your opening statement and I said it was going to come back to the housing. Before I get to what you stated was the outlier, it's interesting to note that your vacancy rate has come down quite considerably over the last number of years. Back in 2002, you were up at over 4.5% almost of the vacancy rate. You're now down to 2.76%. How did you achieve that?

Fearghal Reidy: I'd ask John to come in.

John Kennelly: So, we've just embarked last year, in 2024, on a programme of addressing legacy voids. So, these are voids that are more than 12 months waiting to be re-tenanted. We did a number in 2024 and we've a further 138 voids planned for 2025 and that will address 82 legacy voids, the remaining 82 legacy voids that we have on our books. That has the effect of plateauing or keeping the average reletting time high, but it does obviously have a positive impact on the vacancy rate because the numbers come down.

Ciarán Hayes: So roughly then, John, about those legacy voids. Are these voids that are in hard to let areas or are they voids where there has been a lot needed? There's a need for a lot of maintenance, a lot, the major retrofitting?

John Kennelly: Yeah, they were primarily uh voids that had very high refurbishment costs, structural issues, fire damage issues, etc, that wasn't covered by insurance, so they would be typically the examples. So, we made a concerted effort beginning in 2024 to address all those legacy voids and we have a plan in place and agreed with our colleagues in finance to invest um, to invest approximately um 5.7 million this year of our own resources, along with the 594,000 that we have from the department to address 138 voids, including all 82.

Ciarán Hayes: So nearly about 5.5 million, or about 5.5 million. How much from your own resources again?

John Kennelly: 5.7 from our own resources.

Ciarán Hayes: So, you're over 6 million then?

John Kennelly: Yes, over 6 million.

Ciarán Hayes: That's quite a significant investment. And when you're doing the retrofits, then of those legacy voids, what level, what BER level, are you bringing them up to?

John Kennelly: B2. We bring them

Ciarán Hayes: Minimum B2.

John Kennelly: Minimum B2, yeah.

Ciarán Hayes: Okay so, and in terms then of the, have you any in hard to let areas, or are these all, just when you say legacy voids, just difficult houses too?

John Kennelly: There's a cohort thing in terms of about 2.76%. There's a cohort of about 30, which are primarily single rural dwellings, and we have a plan in place to dispose of those properties. We have two of those due to come before our elected members in July

and we do have a plan in place to dispose of those properties because once they get flipped to the private sector then they'll qualify for the vacant property grant as well.

Ciarán Hayes: Okay.

John Kennelly: And they're difficult for us to bring back into use because there's boundary issues with a single rural dwelling it would have been carved out of a larger landholding typically and there's difficulties with boundary issues.

Ciarán Hayes: There's not a great demand from under waiting lists for houses in those areas?

John Kennelly: No, no.

Ciarán Hayes: Do you operate a time-based system or is it a choice-based system?

John Kennelly: We have choice-based letting at the moment yeah.

Ciarán Hayes: So, it's kind of choice-based, related to time as well on waiting lists. Okay, okay. So, by answering that question then, you've somewhat addressed the issue of the turnaround times. So, let's say, you get this year, in 2025, you get those legacy 100 and.

John Kennelly: 138 this year, this year, of which 82 were legacy.

Ciarán Hayes: What do you expect the turnaround time to be then by the time you get to 2026?

John Kennelly: By 2026, we expect there to be a significant reduction in turnaround time to less than 52 weeks. I wouldn't be able to give you a projection.

Ciarán Hayes: But even at 52 weeks, the average at the moment is 33 weeks nationally.

John Kennelly: As I say, I wouldn't be in a position to give you anything other than less than a year, because everything that we will have in 2026 will be less than a year old, because we are going to address a significant proportion of 2025 voids this year as well.

Fearghal Reidy: If I might Chair, some of the voids are there from 2017. So, the turnaround time is eight years. So, I'd expect the figure in the NOAC indicators to plateau if not increase and then, post 26 which was your question, they should go down and hopefully then keep drilling down to get to the average and then, and then below it.

Ciarán Hayes: So at least there's a plan in place to reduce it even though you accept it might increase in short term you have to go up to come down.

Fearghal Reidy: It will have to go up to come down.

Ciarán Hayes: Yeah, yeah. When talking about um, John, what's your average cost? Or is there an average cost for these retrofits of these legacy voids? Yes, um are you into 50,000 for the unit?

John Kennelly: No, uh, the legacy ones are more expensive. I don't have a breakdown on those, but on average our voids re-tenanting costs are 30,000 in the order of 30,000.

Ciarán Hayes: Okay, and that allows you to qualify then for the department subsidy and the department's funding.

John Kennelly: Yes, to a certain degree. Yes, the 11,000 subvention that lets us do just a number of properties. Not all of them, but a number of them.

Ciarán Hayes: Okay, to turn away quickly again to one of your comments in your opening address, Fearghal, the Dingle decarbonising zone, who's driving that? Is it the council that drives that, or is it the local community organisation?

Fearghal Reidy: To be fair, it's the local community organisation with the support of the Council. They're an excellent local group. We use the decarbonisers on status as a method to justify funding pilots, but they've taken on pilots in terms of renewable energy for farming, actually checking the fields for crop rotation and so forth, active travel and other tourism projects but we support the community so it's very much bottom up.

Ciarán Hayes: So, in my understanding of this and this has been, you know, the Dingle is up in lights, as it were, the Dingle Peninsula is up in lights from the point of view of decarbonising zone. But this initiative, it started before decarbonising zones were nominated, so it was, it was appropriate then for Kerry to appoint, to nominate the Dingle Peninsula as a decarbonisation. So, do you see that then being replicated to other Peninsulas, other areas within Kerry?

Fearghal Reidy: Absolutely, the last conversation I had with them was to pilot sustainable tourism model and more quiet roads and I suppose to calm things in the Peninsula in terms of safety, and I said, we would do all that on condition that it's replicable across the county.

Ciarán Hayes: So, are you taking the lessons then from that for your other five destination plans?

Fearghal Reidy: No, it won't apply to the municipal districts, more so than the tourism. So, it can apply to the tourism destination plans, but the broad lesson is around sustainable agriculture and sustainable transport which will apply to the five municipal districts, okay, that's the intention.

Ciarán Hayes: Okay, it's an issue we might come back to again separately, because it's one of those initiatives, that's to say it's out there and it's in lights. Finally, can I come to

just the whole issue of public liability. Whose baby is that? Just in terms of the settled claims per capita, at the moment, it's way over. It's 28.4 per capita, which is way over the national average of 10.16 euro and I'm just wondering pretty large increase from 2022. I'm just wondering is there a particular reason? Is there an outlier there?

Angela McAllen: There actually is an outlier in 2023 which caused it to increase to 28.40, but I can assure you that in 2024 it's come back down to 10.75. It was an outlier, one particular case, a historical case that caused that.

Ciarán Hayes: So, you're pretty much back down to the average.

Angela McAllen: Absolutely yeah, it's an area that we monitor very closely. We have a specific unit that investigates all claims in conjunction with IPB, so it is an area that gets very close attention from the finance department.

Ciarán Hayes: So, in that context, then if you liaise with IPB on this issue, you're able to hone in and see where the incidents are arising and you can focus your maintenance and so on of roads and footpaths in that area. Is that correct?

Angela McAllen: That's correct, Ciarán. The engineer who actually heads up the unit liaises very closely with the municipal district engineers in Frank's area. As soon as a case arises or an issue becomes apparent, there's nearly immediate liaison between the two areas to ensure that, if there is the defect, that is rectified as soon as possible, to ensure that you know, prevent a re-occurrence. Yeah.

Ciarán Hayes: Okay, just final comment, and for me, just in terms of the performance indicator, John, for the for 2024 and 2025 in particular, when you say that the voids, the, the turnaround time is going to go up. You might put a note in separately just to explain why it's going up, and you know that the plan is to bring it down in 26.

Declan Breathnach: Just very quickly in relation to the public liability issue, interesting to know where you are in terms of the pot hole league that was published this morning and obviously something that we might come back to at some stage, I don't expect answers today but obviously under a freedom of information they've looked at every local authority in terms of miles of road, in terms of claims, and I suppose the big issue that struck me immediately was the, the type and degree of roads that are there. But something I think is going to open the door for public liability claims because it's giving clear indication that you know it doesn't matter. You can claim off the local authority and get X amount of money for potholes alarmed me this morning.

But on a separate note, which goes back to the housing issue and Ciarán. The shared services that you have obviously deal particularly with minor building works and plant hire and such. I'm particularly interested to know, obviously you're the experts on your services and shared services from the experts in terms of procurement and the issue of how you

proactively seek local contractors outside of the procurement process. I'm interested you mightn't be able to answer now, but at some stage we might come back because in recent times we were in a local authority where they indicated, one of the biggest problems in terms of retrofitting was getting plumbers. So, I mean, coming from a background of being involved in a local authority, we've moved away significantly from the issue of having a team to go out and do repairs and such like, is there a need to really look at getting a separate system outside of the procurement process to actually get a handle on your 61 weeks, which extends the legacy issue?

But to make sure that you can reduce the number of weeks for the re-letting and, where you have a team of people available within the region to do necessary repairs, to get them done speedily and I understand why procurement is there in the first instance. I'm not foolish to think that you don't need procurement, but equally the importance of having a fire brigade team to go in and get work done to reduce it. I think it's a no brainer. Local authorities were doing it years ago, they had their own team, personally, I do think it's going to have to go back to that situation, one where

Fearghal Reidy: We just had two questions there in terms of the small businesses and procurement, and the local Government Operation Procurement Centre is a national service centre with 2,500 suppliers on it and the reason we can have so many and as a result so many are small businesses is because we have led the way on a dynamic purchase system which we can come on and off it, the bureaucracy, while it's compliant, absolutely compliant, bureaucracy is easier for smaller businesses and now that's being applied as well in other procurements nationally. On the turnaround for the, for the voids we'll put everything on the table and right now it's procured, but also we have had large direct labour teams as well, so we look at any solution to bring those numbers in line with the average and hopefully exceed them in time.

Declan Breathnach: And lastly, is there a model of good practice there that other local authorities could look at?

Fearghal Reidy: There are certainly turnaround times in other counties, and the indicators highlight those, so we have started to talk to them.

Miriam McDonald: Did you want to comment on the pothole thing or anything?

Angela McAllen: No, we'll come back to you.

Miriam McDonald: Okay, thank you. We're moving on now to, actually me. So, just going back to 2019, when NOAC produced a customer service report, Kerry performed very well in that, 61% on overall satisfaction versus an average of 57% and 61% of people feeling informed by the local authority versus 43%, and 49% feeling it was open and transparent compared to an average of 36%. So, that's going back now six years. But I'm

just wondering, do you measure any performance with customer or customer views or customer perceptions of the moment? And yeah, sorry, yeah.

Fearghal Reidy: No is the short answer. What we are going to put in place in a particular key area of what is long-term survey of residents, and probably every two years, just because of the cost.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah.

Fearghal Reidy: So, we will pilot it, probably 2026, and then take it every two years from there on. I've done it previously and it's actually very, very insightful in terms of perceptions of authority but also perceptions of priorities. It helps get that kind of silent majority voice on to the table as well. It's very powerful.

Miriam McDonald: So, will your longitudinal study also survey? As you know, the survey that we conduct with the LGMA at the moment is generally on people who've contacted the authority in the last 12 months. Are you thinking that the OR1 will go beyond that, because there are a lot of people who pay for local authorities but maybe aren't, aren't aware that they're actually using services in some instances but will obviously have an opinion on.

Fearghal Reidy: I think, each type of survey will have its merits but, because, as you said, there's a broad range of services when you step on to a footpath, they go to public parking, using a local authority service so, to that extent, I think best would be to have a resident survey, okay, and within that then see the level of more face-to-face interaction as well, and what portion then and from residents of when to choose planning service or housing service and so forth, so you can just distill it down that way.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah, yeah, and I suppose I mean one of my bugbears is there's no point to doing surveys unless they're actionable, you know, and unless they drive business improvement. So, I can see you're thinking the same way yeah.

Fearghal Reidy: That's why you do longitudinal

Miriam McDonald: Yeah, um, okay, and I I don't know what, do at the moment. Do you track customer complaints?

Fearghal Reidy: Um, we do not have a customer CRM system, so we are um now scoping that at the moment, and with a view to putting a team in place to roll it out.

Miriam McDonald: And sorry, one last question on the LGMA survey last year. One of the things that came out, uh, was the fact that, um, older people like to be communicated in a different way to younger people. And I'm just wondering and I don't know who, or maybe no one had this, whether you're using things like social media or how do you reach, or is there a plan to reach, younger people?

Fearghal Reidy: I thought you were going to say older people.

Miriam McDonald: I think older people are probably you know, they know, it's more young people maybe.

Fearghal Reidy: We do have Comhairle na nÓg and the PPNs, but again it's an area that we do need to work on. Just last week we had an event in the Tralee Youth Services and the assistant to the chief executive there is about 17 and he was very enthusiastic with his report on how we can engage better, so we'll be taking those onboard.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah, yeah, because I think the whole area of local democracy, not just what's happening in Ireland, but globally I think young people are getting more involved in, in having their say so yeah.

Fearghal Reidy: The other thing we do is have one of the Comhairle na nÓg will, not just present to the members but present to management team, which makes a strong case for them.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah, yeah, no, I mean, I do like that the voice of the public or the voice of the customer comes to the management team. Yeah, yeah, okay. Thank you very much. I'm going to pass over to John.

John Byrne: Thanks, chair. You presented at the Good Practice in Local Government seminar in 2023 on your community response forum. Have any other local authorities been in contact with you in relation to that, or do you know if it's been copied or aped anywhere else?

Niamh O' Sullivan: Yeah, John, I can reply to that. I suppose I gave the presentation at that event and it was very well received. I'd say even a number of people might have tuned in online as well and contacted us subsequently. But I think it's a model that's rolled out in nearly most local authorities now, particularly those that are hosting quite a significant number of new arrivals. And I suppose a lot of the learning from our model came from our response to COVID and I suppose that group was kind of reconfigured to meet the needs of the new arrivals coming in to Kerry. So, we would link a lot regionally with the regional local authorities.

But as a result of the showcase from it we would have received a number of queries. But my understanding is that model is being rolled out in other areas and is proving quite successful. I think one of the areas where again since then is the integration projects that have come out as a result of that. So even since the presentation to know at that time, there's a number of working groups specifically now kind of established through the integration forum allowing to kind of pathways to employment, integration projects and I suppose we've been fortunate as well through specific funding schemes and the community recognition fund which the department subsequently provided to local

authorities who are hosting new arrivals to deliver on a lot of those objectives with our partners in local development and across the HSE and Department of Social Protection. So, we are learning an awful lot from the actual response itself, but my understanding is other local authorities are doing a similar response as well, based on the structures that have been established in Kerry and other areas as well.

John Byrne: Have you any other good projects on the go at the moment?

Niamh O' Sullivan: In relation to integration specifically, I suppose I think there would be a lot of follow on integration projects, definitely the pathways to employment. I suppose in Kerry, as a result of when they came in as new arrivals, a lot of the big gap is obviously the English speaking language. So, there's been quite a good number of initiatives there to try and help the new arrivals. I suppose a lot of new arrivals at Kerry came from very war-torn areas initially but they are very good. Some of them would have English and some obviously have very, very poor English. But I suppose, as Fearghal referenced earlier, I suppose the fact that we are a tourism county, in the hospitality sector we have the Kerry Tourism Industry Federation as a representative body. Kerry is actually a very good model. It allows us as a local authority to deal with one representative body for the sector. So, they've been linking in with us in the integration forum in developing initiatives to try and encourage and support the new arrivals into employment in the hospitality sector and in other areas. And I know even from our local enterprise office we would have a number of queries coming in from the new arrivals, and particularly the Ukrainian community, in relation to setting up their own business or how they can and the supports that could be available to them. So, it is I suppose I think it's around, John might have the figures. I think nearly 20%, if not more, of the new arrivals are actually in employment in Kerry, so which is quite significant as well.

John Byrne: And is that forum made up of, you know, stakeholders across the tourism sector?

Niamh O' Sullivan: Yes, the working groups allow us to go a deeper dive. The Kerry Tourism Industry Federation would have a lot of the hotels, the restaurants, all within the hospitality accommodation sectors would be represented on that across. And it's countywide across the five municipal districts. It's an ideal network for us as a local authority in lots of areas. Yeah, absolutely, because otherwise a county size area you'd be all over the place. So, there's a number of examples with the Kerry Tourism Industry Federation where there has been cooperation, not just in that area but also in how we promote the county as well.

John Byrne: Okay, thanks Chair.

Margaret Lane: I want to talk to you about financial management and I suppose you're aware I'm looking at you, Angela, because I'm assuming you're going to be answering

that question. We issued an internal audit report in local authorities and published in March of 2024. There was one specific issue in relation to Kerry and that was, I think, the head of internal audit held a role in addition. She held a management role in addition to the head of internal audit role and I suppose the perception then about that didn't look quite right in terms of independence. So, I'm just wondering has that been addressed and how have you addressed it now?

Kathleen Moriarty: Internal audit doesn't report.

Margaret Lane: Oh, I'm sorry.

Kathleen Moriarty: I had a look into the finance, but I'm concerned about the - Christy can come in or I can answer.

Christy O'Connor: That has been addressed, so there's a senior executive officer now in sole responsibility as heading the internal audit unit.

Margaret Lane: Okay, that's good to hear. Thanks very much, so I suppose that brings me to the wider issue, then, of the internal audit report and its recommendation, and where are you in terms of the implementation of those recommendations as they relate to Kerry?

Christy O'Connor: Yeah, we've I suppose we've taken on board the recommendations, that came from it and, uh, we're working towards the various targets that are set out in it. As I said, the management piece was in place. Our internal audit function works towards the standards set out by the Institute of Internal Auditors. Procedures manuals are in place and are currently operating. A training plan is in place for any of the staff in the internal audit unit to ensure that they're kept up to date. I suppose as part of planning for each year, a review of the adequacy of the internal audit resources is carried out, and that's carried out in conjunction with the audit committee and we'll review it on an ongoing basis. In relation to internal audit networks, our head of internal audit is part of the Southern Region Local Government Internal Audit Network and is chair of the group in 2023 and will be secretary again in 2028. So, and they're involved in hosting a function or a meeting for the southern region in the coming weeks in early July.

So also then, the one of the other points raised was the encouraging existing staff to obtain professional qualifications. So that's being discussed by the network generally and it looks like it's possible for the heads of internal audits units to become members of the Institute of Internal Auditors through the chapter by experience module. So, there's a presentation given uh to the into the sector recently in relation to that and we're working towards that and our head of internal audit is interested in that programme. So, it's being considered uh for uh in relation to that. Um, fraud and corruption, and we had a foreign corruption policy in place but we're updating that now to in line with a new template that's come for the sector. As I said, we take the internal audit function as regard to the

standards of the Institute of Internal Auditors and in relation to risk, we have a risk register and IT is high in that it's reviewed on a regular basis and cyber security is a standing item for our internal audit committee and we brief them on it on an ongoing basis together with the management team.

We have a strategic plan in place for the period 2021 to 2025 and that now will be reviewed in the current year. So, to go forward for 2026, we prepare an annual report on the internal audit function that's prepared by the audit committee and is brought to the council for formal approving. That was brought to the June meeting of the council and is taken into account by the auditor as well. We have a tracker of recommendations coming from the audits in place and these are monitored on an ongoing basis.

Margaret Lane: And I presume that includes the local government audits as well.

Christy O'Connor: Yes, the southern region, oh yes, in relation to an external assessment.

Margaret Lane: Yeah, I think that was the key one. That was a huge concern for us, because the majority of local authorities didn't have it in place.

Christy O'Connor: Yes, so that's under discussion by the internal audit network and due to come back with a recommendation to us in relation to that. So, we would be looking at definitely putting something in place for 2026. We're kind of waiting, just to see what's happening across the sector.

Margaret Lane: Oh, of course, yes.

Christy O'Connor: I think those are the compliance test. We again, that's in the discussion you, the network, so we're working across the sector to see what's best practice and what can, what can be done.

Margaret Lane: There may be a kind of a general procurement to obtain authority for the sector?

Christy O'Connor: Yeah.

Margaret Lane: Okay, yeah, Christy, that's very comprehensive. Thank you very much. I'm going to hand over to Noel now.

Noel Harrington: Thanks again to welcome visitors from Kerry. I have to say I'm just across the border in the Bear Peninsula so I have a fair bit of an understanding of the issues. The West Cork issues and the Kerry issues quite similar. So, my question is essentially I'll be looking at the local government audit service issues that have been arisen out of the audit that was recorded at the end of October last. The first one refers to the Listowel bypass and significant overrun, first of all on the construction costs directly and then some of the consultants and administrative costs. The auditor identified some

issues with that and reported on what the status at that time was. Is there any update with respect to the Listowel bypass and would there have been any lessons taken on board at the council? Looking at, you know the Killarney Farranfore road all the major projects that would have to be in the pipeline as well that would benefit from any experience on the Listowel.

Frank Hartnett: Yeah, I can take that one. In relation to the Listowel bypass, that was originally, there was a total scheme budget that was agreed with the TII a number of years ago and subsequently, when the thing went out to contract and the lowest contractor won it, they revised downwards then the total scheme budget.

Noel Harrington: So TII revised downwards the budget?

Frank Hartnett: Yes, TII. So, they're the ones that approved the total scheme budget. So originally, we were up around 70 million, we'll call it, and they brought it back down to 62. And that was on the basis of their original estimate for the road construction we said that the contract price was around 40 million. The contract, the lowest contractor that was awarded the contract, was 31 million. Now it was a company called Wills Brothers. Uh, an excellent company we had. We had dealt with them before. In fact, their first road contract ever was in Kerry and we had dealt with them over 20 years ago. So, a very reputable contractor.

Initially then there were design issues that hadn't been taken into account during the tender documents phase, specifically in relation to the scour protection, there's a significant bridge, that's a 120 metre span over the river Feale and there was additional measures, in other words, there was another almost an abutment, a secondary abutment had to be built, had to be designed first of all and then had to be priced by the contractor. So that was an extra over before they even started on the ground. The contractor ultimately, we have settled the final account with him. But there are still some outstanding land issues. Not all of the land has been bought there, there are still some that will be referred to arbitration. There are three or four schemes or three or four cases in particular. So, until that is resolved, the TII have said that only then will they adjust the final total scheme budget then for the job.

Noel Harrington: So, they have yet to refer the total price to the TSB. Is that the case?

Frank Hartnett: The TII. Until all matters are resolved, they will not update the TSB, but it will obviously be revised upward from the 62.

Noel Harrington: In terms of the original design and the this, the bridge issue, the scouring issue, was council responsible for that design contract?

Frank Hartnett: No. It was, we would say, the employers' representative. It was an issue that they hadn't foreseen, but subsequently they did. So, we have an issue with the with

the employers representative as well. There are still outstanding monies owed to them and it was likely that that would go to conciliation.

Noel Harrington: This would more than likely feature in the next LGAS. The second issue, again coming from the LGAS, the local government.

Frank Hartnett: You asked about learning. It's a very important one. On this, we've worked very closely with the TII in achieving the final account. It took a good number of months to eventually settle it. But the learning out of that was for the next big project that was on our books was the South Kerry Greenway so and that's also funded by the TII. And they then recommended an additional layer of oversight of the contract documents before they ever go out to tender.

So, there's a specialist company that they recommended that consists of X to the contractors and consultants that have reviewed the documents for the South Kerry Greenway before we ever go to avoid. So that was the big learning for ourselves and the TII.

Noel Harrington: The second item discussing, again referred to in the audit service report, where you know the, that there's companies that are wholly owned by the council. Most of them working quite well up there we report particularly on two together running deficits the Killarney Sports and Leisure Campus limited and the Tralee Bay Wetlands company limited. Now in the response to the local government audit service it was suggested that now these were going to the running deficits were going to be addressed. And I'm just wondering, I note from the 24 returns both the companies are still increasing their cumulative deficit, which would be significant strain on Council finances I presume. We'd be interested to know what the council would be doing to kind of address this, can they squeeze or bleed further revenues from these two companies to at least halt the deficit situation and that it wouldn't increase the cumulative deficit? And on the Tralee one, it's a very low fixed assets value and how you can sweat extra revenue from that or what to do. Where is this going with this company essentially?

Fearghal Reidy: I suppose overall we've reviewed our governance of these companies and our roles etc. That's the first piece that's now completed and so that governance is very clear and much more strengthened. The second element, on the Tralee Bay Wetlands, we'll be looking at that, maybe subsuming it back into the local authority, the assets aren't of huge value and employment, but also we're looking at the development of the area as well and currently the Town and Village renewal scheme to attract more footfall down to it with working with the ETB on that and so the level of assets and the attractiveness will increase. But we're also looking at its actual governance and its role within the local authority and Christy, do you want to answer on the other?

Angela McAllen: In relation to the Killarney Sports and Leisure Campus. I suppose there is a very large asset value with that particular property. How and ever, we do strive, I'm a member on the board of that Killarney Sports and Leisure, as is Kathleen Moriarty here today. Um, we do work very closely with the operators of that um of that facility to ensure that whilst we do give a subvention to the leisure centre, the local authority it's approved every year budget time, we do strive to ensure that um I suppose, no further losses accrue. Um, the outturn for this year is, I think it's just a small um surplus actually, uh, just out turned. I think it was approved by the board there a number a month or two ago. Uh, so we would hope that in time we'll be able to address.

They are historical deficits that occurred at the build stage, at the very early onset or outset of that project um about 15 years ago. So we would hope to address those over time, but we do work very closely with the operator um and as well we do, I would say, as you say, sweat the asset. Every inch of that facility is used effectively by the community um and it's a very, very well utilised and well used facility in the town of Killarney by the public and visitors as a whole.

Noel Harrington: So it's running, you've been running it, for those are service level agreements yeah with them.

Angela McAllen: Yeah, it goes out to tender like every three years. Okay, yeah, for the running of the facility.

Noel Harrington: Yeah, so you mentioned here that historical deficit was created at a construction phase.

Angela McAllen: Well, not at the construction phase, but at the early onset, at the creation of the asset. Yeah.

Noel Harrington: It looks this year or for last year. You're looking at a context of almost 100,000, just over 100,000.

Angela McAllen: Yes, I suppose a large element of that is depreciation. But the operating? I suppose we're trying to work within the accounting rules as well. The operating, yes, more or less a break, even a slight surplus this year. However, that the deficit there is actually assigned to depreciation. But we're trying to incrementally, I suppose, eliminate that over time.

Noel Harrington: Can I just further ask on the Tralee Wetlands project? Does it feature in any development plan, the Municipal District plan? Is there any focus? I know that you have an aspiration to do something with it, but is that set in stone?

Fearghal Reidy: It's under construction, yeah. So right now, they decided additional block that was underutilised at the site and it's under construction through Town and Village and our own resources and a partnership with the ETB to have a training facility in Marine

Biology and that's another element, which is a cafe, so there's no cafe at the site. So that's something we intend to develop is a social enterprise to bring footfall, that also brings some social enterprise and community and link so that's at construction.

Noel Harrington: The revenue should surely increase. But the asset case, all that sort of thing, yes, and it's going to increase as well.

Fearghal Reidy: It will be very hard to sweat the asset like the wetlands and wind turbines.

Noel Harrington: Does it remain on the books?

Fearghal Reidy: We might look at integrating it into our own structures.

Margaret Lane: Can I just ask you in relation to that if you do integrate that structure would that mean you'd have to write off the deficit then through the council's?

Angela McAllen: Uh yes, we'd have to. We'd have to address that at the time we're going to through a due diligence exercise at the moment continuing to.

Margaret Lane: I know you've stopped the deficit increasing in the Killarney sports one, but the other one is continuing to increase.

Angela McAllen: Yes.

Margaret Lane: And I think the last accounts are 2022, I think, or 23, I'm just not sure. Do you know what is the current situation there, has it deteriorated further?

Fearghal Reidy: We don't have that but we can come back to you.

Margaret Lane: Okay, you might come back to us on that please.

Miriam McDonald: Okay and just following on from that just on procurement. I'm looking at auditors report was commenting there that I know this is 2023 but there was a comment in there that the system for procurement in general was quite manual. The response at the time was that the council is committed to comply with public procurement processes and will ensure that and form supports the corporate objectives focused on delivering value for money through purchasing strategies consistent with EB and national procurement, legislative and policy requirements. So I'm just wondering I know you've spoken about the system, the shared services, system for minor works. Just on other procurement. What for major works, have there been any changes since the ultimate support?

Angela McAllen: The reference to the manual is in relation to the contract tracker and that's a facility that we would. So in the absence of a formal centralised contract tracker system, which I understand is being developed by the LGMA at the moment, we, we operate a manual one. Our procurement office manages a manual version of that contract

tracker which has proved very useful, particularly with the most recent requirements to return any deviations from the usage of centralised procurement arrangements to the OGP, which just it's just underway or just finished. So so obviously we're waiting for the, for the centralised automated version of that, but in the meantime, we'll have the manual version. But we do I suppose, uh, Frank and and John and the team would deal with the, the larger tenders, but obviously we would avail of the e-tenders we avail of centralised procurement arrangements where available um and to, I suppose, optimise the return for ourselves and to comply with procurement arrangements and requirements.

Miriam McDonald: Okay, thank you. Okay, any further questions?

Ciarán Hayes: Just one question, and it's an observation I suppose I made over the last maybe 18 months to two years, where we as NOAC have been in both Kerry and Donegal over that time period and it was interesting going to Donegal.

They were saying that no great issue, you know, when there's procurement, when the council is going out for procurement for construction, particularly on the housing side, no great issue, they're getting plenty of tenders. And the opposite seemed to be in the case in Kerry where there was, you know, some difficulty in terms of getting contractors to submit and tender, particularly for housing construction. Is that still the same or has it changed?

Fearghal Reidy: I believe it's not. I'll ask John to come in on that.

John Kennelly: Yeah, there are a small number, I suppose, of uh contractors who continually tender in Kerry. We've not been hugely successful in getting additional contractors to tender for work however we do have a tender currently where we will just continue to tender after assessment so it's still an issue for us.

Ciarán Hayes: It seems to me then that it is down to whatever the tradition is within those areas a good tradition in the north of contractors, and not so much, obviously, down in Kerry. Does that cause some problems, then, in terms of trying to get economic borrowing?

John Kennelly: Yeah, one of the things we are looking at is scale. Obviously, a lot of the contracts that we would award in Kerry would be of, say, 20 units or less in terms of scale. So we are actively looking at that, to upscale that, to maybe try attract more bigger players in here yeah.

Ciarán Hayes: Okay, interesting thank you.

Miriam McDonald: Declan did you want to ask?

Declan Breathnach: Yeah, just two general questions, one relates to your progress in relation to derelict sites how you intend to pursue that into the future. The second one

then very quickly relates to recent announcements in relation to Airbnbs and the impact of the illegality. In the scrutiny report back in 2018, you know, obviously there was 340 units in Dingle alone, away from 150. What do you see as the impact in terms of the making of certain Airbnbs now illegal, particularly with your leisure industry?

Fearghal Reidy: So, on the derelict sites, our derelict sites register has been cleansed and now we're taking what I call a blitz approach. So, we pick a town and blitz it. It should affect, in Cahersiveen, where the team is to see 10 have gone on the derelict sites register, we're also applying a charge. So, in addition to the standard letter collection, we're going legal and applying a charge to the property so we have the carrot and the stick and also the vacant housing grants, we have about 600 on that, 600 files open, about 300 approved so we have the carrot and the stick in terms of vacancy and dereliction but very targeted as well as reactive as well as a very targeted approach in targeting towns and blitzing them.

AirBnB is a controversial issue in Kerry, but I would say tourism is also very important to use so finding that balance is critical, I think our Oireachtas members have been particularly vocal on it for obvious reasons in the case of Kerry but it's finding that balance but we work with Fáilte Ireland on that as well.

Noel Harrington: Just something you mentioned, John, on the housing from Ciarán's questions. You mentioned about those 30-odd rural houses that have been voids or vacant for a very long time you mentioned. Would they have been historically shared ownership, a shared ownership scheme house?

John Kennelly: Yes, they typically did, the late 70/80's SRDs were carved out from a larger holding, generally for a family member and obviously there weren't the same materials back then and boundary issues. Septic tanks could be located outside of the boundaries.

Noel Harrington: Yeah, so it's not so much. It's not a, it's a challenge to bring them back into it, to into stock. But your equally, mentioned, it's not something you might be we could run there. The open market yeah, we'll still have those challenges. I presume, with the other than the open market, notwithstanding the demand that's out there for those type of properties. It's just like I think it's at a peak or it's at a very high demand.

Fearghal Reidy: These are rural cottages. Yes, they are the original rural cottage schemes. So there is a demand in rural local areas, a high demand in rural local areas for housing for particularly in Gaeltacht areas so it won't address that fully but it helps show cause in terms of home ownership in rural areas and they would be eligible for the grants but also the normal, if they wanted to extend, the normal rural housing policies would apply as well. So, it's addressing rural housing. It's an effort to address private rural housing.

Noel Harrington: And also addressing those long term. That's better, better driving you on in that respect. Do you have a timescale for that?

John Kennelly: We have the first two out of 30 that we hope to bring them before council in July. Now there is obviously a mark down on the valuation because of the constraints that we mentioned, but the first two properties we are actually going to achieve the market value assessment that we undertook. We have firm offers to match that.

Noel Harrington: I wouldn't be that surprised.

John Kennelly: But obviously, because they're vacant for such a long period as well, they probably qualify for the full derelict grant of 70,000.

Noel Harrington: Everything is going for them.

John Kennelly: And it's just about reactivation as well, you know. So with that, yeah.

Noel Harrington: But you have to consider all those boundaries, those waste management issues, those issues. You'd still have to have those dealt with. But they will add to your drain on our resources?

John Kennelly: As I say, it's job work has been ongoing for about a year at this stage, we're in a position now where we're actually bringing them to our members for consideration. But it is an ongoing job of work that we are going to do.

Fearghal Reidy: Again, the likelihood is it will drain our resources to resolve those issues, particularly the legal team and the housing team, but we need to resolve them. Yeah, they're, they're, they're an opportunity to own houses, number one, number two they're a blot on the landscape as they currently stand. So there's very good reason that we put a bit of resources to clear it internally.

Noel Harrington: Okay.

Miriam McDonald: Okay, John.

John Byrne: Thanks Chair. Just going back to the Killarney Sport and Leisure, do you avail of those sports capital grants with the LSSIF, or have you any other projects planned under any of those headings?

Angela McAllen: No, not for the development of that particular leisure centre, but we do avail.

Fearghal Reidy: We're looking at the next round of grants particularly. You might have heard at the start of the year the roof collapsed in the Tralee sports and leisure centre. I have to say the response by our own team, the ETB and it is the social enterprise that is run on behalf of has been extraordinary and the management has been extraordinary. So, the pool is now open in June there's a temporary gym and they have the money to

do that. But in terms of the restoration of it and hopefully build back better, for the want of a better term we will be looking at the NISF at the stage. So we've already engaged with the Department on that.

John Byrne: I'm sure you have them in the new road there it's easy for you to engage with them.

Fearghal Reidy: They're close by, thanks.

Angela McAllen: Just to come in on the Killarney Sports Grant, did build it, it was in the first instance and we've certainly been availing of some of the smaller capital grants and some of the equipment.

Miriam McDonald: Any other questions?

Okay, I just have a couple of questions coming out of it and some of them are small enough in terms of the 10,000 Ukrainians and I know they're. They're well settled now, but and I know there was initially there was a lot of discussion on their impact on, and the tourism sector and so on. Is that still presenting a challenge in terms of your housing stock?

Okay, and my other question was just again, more in terms of staffing, some of the other authorities we've spoken to. One of the things they're grappling with is that the age profile in the local authority is, you know, kind of mid-40s up or 50s up. Is that the same issue with yourselves? Do you have the challenge?

Fearghal Reidy: It's the same issue, yes, it's a challenge we want to, previous point, appeal to younger generations. So that's why the Communications plan won't just be what we're doing, but also the appeal of public service and I suppose the more curious things that we do as well, you know, painting the moorings, the navigation buoys and everything else, bring those things that we do to the forefront and Kerry County Council as a place of choice to work, which, that is what has evolved very much to. The younger generations want the impact, so we want to make sure that that comes across in our campaigns, but there's a bit of work to be done in terms of joining recruitment with our communications plans and to their well-being plan and that's all being done at the moment.

Miriam McDonald: And has the you and has the you know post-COVID, the move to you know more, not rural living but out of cities, has that helped at all?

Fearghal Reidy: You can ask James that, he moved from Dublin.

Miriam McDonald: You can never, you can't make a ruling out of an example of one.

Fearghal Reidy: But you can use it as a pilot, a testimonial, strong testimonials, that people want the quality of life. And that's not just us. Employers like Astellas and Kerry Group and Fexco, all pointing to quality of life, factors that have retained staff, attracting

them. They're attracted by quality of life. Query, will they get housing. Yeah, but definitely they do sell the employment opportunities as well as a quality of life, career progression opportunity. And then they managed to retain staff in Kerry because of it, it's very strong.

Miriam McDonald: Okay, and my last question really relates to economic development and I know you mentioned in your introduction that you were looking to diversify the local economic base and I suppose you know attracting more people to the region in general, and I know there there's some work underway, as far as I understand, to promote Kerry not just as a tourism county. But and I'm just wondering what, what work has been done in that area, what kind of other industries are you looking at other than.

Fearghal Reidy: I'll ask Niamh to come in on the detail, but just in six months since I've been there, business post had had this fantastic economic summit in Kerry and at that it focused on AI, health and climate, green economy and the changing geopolitical situation. Very high-profile speakers, but what was heartening about it was that businesses from Kerry, small businesses trading globally on very high value-added products all attended, did business and launched product at it. So, the demonstrations are there already. The trends at the inter-census period the trends are very clear in terms of the trends in employment and financial services in particular, and tech. And to be fair to Moira before me and Niamh's economic team, you'll see these innovation hubs throughout the county. The RDI in Killarney is a fine one, national centre for excellence on AI.

What we're doing now, is rezoning we're doing the future development plan which is underway, zoning more land along the technology park, the ingredients there of an innovation district. I'm 30 years in economic development. These things have evolved but we have industry and we have academia and research, very high level research through MTU there. So that combined, we're now going to masterplan it with, with IDA, with EI and with MTU and ourselves as that innovation district of Kerry so it's an exemplar already of that 30 million being spent in STEM by MTU and 330 million being spent by Astellas that we planned. So the demonstration is there and so, again, that would be a hub of innovation and then we have our local hubs across the county as well. But it builds on and maybe Niamh could come in come in on other activities?

Niamh O' Sullivan: Yeah, no, and Fearghal has done a really good synopsis there, but really. But I suppose it all stemmed from an economic recovery plan that was adopted by the full council a few years ago and I think from that and from a survey and research that we did with all the sectors was that obviously tourism is one of our main. One in five are employed in tourism-related businesses. But a challenge, which is identified in the local economic and community plan as well, is broadening our economic base. So, it was agreed a key action out of that was to develop a new brand for Kerry. Kerry never had its own singular brand and to develop there would be different websites. Obviously, the hospitality sector invests millions in promoting their own businesses. So, there was

agreement that we need to have one central portal to promote the county, but not just as a destination for tourism, it's a destination for investment and to live as a community and quality of life that Fearghal referred to. That was quite challenging. It's actually an example we put up. There's an example of good practice. We've submitted it to several of the local government awards and things like that, in that we had to get all the sectors together. So that took nearly a year and a half, two years to agree a brand and to develop the portal. So, the Kerry Tourism Industry Federation kind of was strengthened around that in relation to their membership and we also worked with Kerry SciTech, which was representing our industry sector. They're now the tech industry alliance. Since then, they've amalgamated with Cork, so with more of a regional focus as well, but initially with Kerry focus as well around that. So, these. So, what we have is we've a governance structure in place now, led by the local authority.

Obviously, we're the main partner here to ensure that we all work together and there's governance structures put in place where there is representatives at a senior level from the tourism industry federation, the local authority and the tech industry alliance. And in the budget last year, the year before, the members agreed around a marketing officer and first time for us as a local authority and her role is very much as ensuring that those governments arrangements that are adhered to with memorandum of understanding with the partners as well in relation to it. And there's a clear budget heading as well into marketing for the discover Kerry portal. But when you go on that portal now even the IDA, the feedback we're getting from the IDA in particular is that they're finding it a very useful vehicle. So, when they're promoting different destinations internationally for foreign direct investment, at least they can just one one port of call, you know. So you just discover, Kerry.ie, if you want to have a look at it and you can go into the different pillars work, live and invest or visit and in relation to the work element of it, you'll see, as Fearghal mentioned there, the number of businesses and industries were very strong on kind of manufacturing, farmer, life sciences, and there's a lot of scaling up in the agri-tech, biotech areas as well.

But there's testimonial there from businesses around how they have managed to run a very successful company in the county and how they've overcome any challenges that they may have met and how they're managing to retain their staff and the skills and skills force there as well. And but as well as that, when you look at the tourism side of it, it shows what's happening in Kerry. If you're planning a trip to Dingle or a trip to the Listowel in the next couple of weeks, you can go into the municipal districts and you'll see what's happening in that area, any events that are upcoming. So, we work with the chamber alliances in particular around community events. So, one of the big things we had to manage very carefully from the outset is that you'd have the likes of the INEC and Siamsa Tíre, and other venues as well who promote what they do. But we wanted to make sure that the community events have the same platform so that small community festival in

Dingle or Tarbert or Lixnaw gets as much profile as the big event in Killarney or Tralee. So, it shows all the festival events that are on.

In relation to living in the county, Kerry County Council in particular are the lead in the content around that side of it where it shows the kind of the schools. If you want to actually come and live in Kerry for remote working or if you're looking at a second site opportunity for your business that might be located in Cork or New York or Dublin. But what schools are there for my family? We're hearing back that you know, particularly from Enterprise Ireland IDA, that it's not just now about relocating your business or a second site as well. My family, you know what's there for my family. So that quality of life piece is covered quite well and as you find out, what playgrounds are there, what kind of facilities, sports facilities are there, the schools, where's the nearest beach? You know, kind of the nearest town. So, we're constantly building on that. But it is a really good example of collaboration, you know, because all partners are still working together. I think no matter what events we go to, we're all showcasing it as a kind of a vehicle for people to use. We've had great engagement for businesses to come on free and promote what they're doing. So, shops and you know particularly we have the majority of the business in Kerry would be small businesses 90% are only employing up to 10 people so they can go on and promote what they're doing on the site as well, for free, as well as the community.

Fearghal Reidy: I'd just add to that as well. The regional approach is critical. So we're very involved in the regional enterprise plan but for us the Taoiseach as we talked about earlier talk of Cork Kerry Corridor, which is very important in connectivity and the role that MTU had played in the establishment of the men's technological university Kerry, Tralee in particular as a university town so that, that regional approach helps us um create the critical mass around technology, fintech, cyber security, a number of areas.

Miriam McDonald: Okay, and are there any infrastructural challenges? You know we hear all about, whether that's broadband electricity, water, etc.

Fearghal Reidy: Housing.

Miriam McDonald: Housing, yeah.

Fearghal Reidy: We don't particularly have huge problems on broadband. A lot of these high tech businesses can operate across the county, from remote areas. It's housing is the issue.

Miriam McDonald: Okay, and my last question, which goes from kind of macro to micro, do you am I correct in thinking you don't have a communications team, or do you have a communications officer or what's that?

Fearghal Reidy: We do have a communications officer and a we have a marketing officer and so they're both separate at the moment. We're building up that communications plan now so we have a bigger presence. You see it in the social media.

Miriam McDonald: I can see you have a lot of needs, you know from everything from the recruitment right across.

Fearghal Reidy: Yeah, okay but as Niamh was saying, our communications is via the Discover Kerry as distinct to Kerry Country Council.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah yeah, yeah.

Fearghal Reidy: But we are behind that.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah, so you're getting all of that as well. Unfortunately, doing something good creates a lot more work. Okay, any final questions?

Declan Breathnach: Just a very very, very quick one. I mean obviously the issue, the issue of challenges, the opportunities and difficulties. Is there anything that the NOAC board should be aware of? In terms of issues that may be not on the agenda here today but may hit us equally or individually?

Fearghal Reidy: Probably two that I can immediately come up with. One is the transition of Irish water, we've got, a large workforce in Kerry because of the structure of the county and how it's set up. So we've got 130 at the moment that we don't know whether they'll come into us or not. We are transitioning them. We have a programme we're highlighting the messaging but if they come without those in a workforce plan, that's a liability of seven point nine million. Second issue arose recently is in terms of activating land and buying property, particularly for housing. We bought quite a large, large area in Tralee recently that could have possibly accommodated a thousand public, private and social, affordable and private housing. We are subject to the RZLT, which then, we're an outlier on that at about 702,000. So, we now have to consider when we're trying to activate land by purchasing it, consider these additional costs that we were assured at the time that would be covered by the exchequer.

Ciarán Hayes: That's annual cost then for your, so if you don't get approval to develop that site for a few years your impacting your costs.

Fearghal Reidy: We'd be keen to activate land because we need to.

Ciarán Hayes: But all local authorities then in terms of future land banks are purchasing future land banks.

Fearghal Reidy: You'd have to consider that additional cost in your risk assessment

Ciarán Hayes: Buying social housing if you're requiring land for social housing you can at least roll up some of the costs of that including some of the interest costs, paying costs into your scheme

Fearghal Reidy: That's our intention, but that's not clear at this stage.

Ciarán Hayes: And the RZLT's is on top of that again.

Fearghal Reidy: Yeah.

Ciarán Hayes: That's an issue, yeah.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah, and just on the Irish water issue, do you have any time frame for that? I mean, I know we're probably in discussion.

Fearghal Reidy: December 2026 people have to make up their mind. So now it is transitioning. We're getting some plans from that 132 people, that cohort. We are getting individual plans and that's where it has to work, but we don't know, because it's up to the individual to decide. We don't know what that liability would be.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah, okay.

Fearghal Reidy: Known, unknown.

Miriam McDonald: Okay well, I think that's all the questions from our side. Is there anything else from yourselves or any point you'd like to further clarify or anything? Okay, well, thank you very much, all of you, for your time today. We really appreciate the fact that you came up here and made yourselves available, and thank you also for your responses and I'll bring the meeting to a close.

Claire Gavin: Just the Secretariat will be in touch with you with to say there's a transcript of today's meeting and the recording of it before it goes up, just to ensure that maybe things like the transcript place names and things like that often just don't get transcribed properly. So, you'll have sight of it.

John Byrne: It's why I might come out with something else. Thank you.

