



**NOAC/Westmeath County Council
September 23rd, 2025**

Miriam McDonald

Okay, good morning everybody and I'd like to welcome the team here today, I really appreciate it. Before we start I'm just going to introduce members of NOAC or let them introduce themselves. So I'll start, Brian if you want to.

Brian Cawley

Sure, Brian Cawley, member of NOAC, ex-IPA, so I'm sure I've met you in the past, nice to meet you again.

Noel Harrington

Noel Harrington, board member, ex I suppose Oireachtas member and local authority elected member Cork.

Kathleen Holohan

Kathleen Holohan, NOAC board member, former chief executive in Carlow County Council.

Miriam McDonald

Now Declan if you want to.

Declan Breathnach

Declan Breathnach, nice to meet some of you again and a bit like Noel, ex Oireachtas and local authority for a long number of years.

Anne Haugh

Anne Haugh, former director of service, just recently left the system last year, formerly in Clare, Limerick and Kerry local authorities.

Margaret Lane

Margaret Lane, board member of NOAC, formerly of Ervia, Irish Water.

Miriam McDonald

And then just members of the Secretariat.

Claire Gavin

Claire Gavin, head of Secretariat.

John Goldrick

Good morning, John Goldrick, member of the NOAC Secretariat.

Alan McDermott

Morning again, Alan McDermott, I'm a member of the Secretariat.

Joan Comiskey

and Joan Comiskey, hi, I'm a member of the Secretariat as well.

Miriam McDonald

I'm Miriam McDonald, I'm chairing, a member of NOAC and chair for today. So thank you all very much again for coming. And as you know, NOAC is the National Oversight and Audit Commission for local government in Ireland, established under the Local Government Reform Act 2014.

And our functions are wide ranging, covering all of the local authority activities, including scrutiny of performance, which is why we're here today, and in particular financial performance. But we also, as you know, support best practice, we've been running our best practice workshops and seminars, and also implementation of national government policy and corporate plans, and in general, public service reform. But a core function, as I said, is individual performance, and that's what we're going to look at today.

So, and our aim, I suppose, is that with this new approach of recording these meetings, that we make this process available to more people. We, throughout the process, not just with yourselves, we give the public access to all of the work that local authorities are doing, and the value for money that local authorities give, which maybe often isn't recognised. We also hope to identify, you know, we carry out a number of the scrutiny visits and then validation visits, and through that, identify best practice.

We've seen, even in preparing for this meeting, a number of areas of best practice with yourselves, which we then hope that other local authorities can benefit from too. So, so that's the aim of today. I'll hand over to yourself now for your opening address, and we'll go from there, and then we'll open the floor to questions.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Yeah, thank you very much, Miriam. And before I read the formal statement, so to speak, just like I say, we're very glad to be here, and I'm glad to be accompanied by the full management team, and I'll just ask them to introduce themselves and the areas that they cover. I've been working for Westmeath County Council now for over 30 years, so I know the place fairly well at this point, and the geography and the territory and I'm glad to say that I feel in those decades, we've made tremendous progress as a county, and that the County Council has been instrumental in that, really, in delivering the infrastructure that people need to live happy, prosperous lives. So, we have challenges, as we always will, and we're working our way through them, and we'd be glad to discuss those with you in a bit more detail, maybe later on, if you wish. They range across all of our functions.

Nobody is without them, but we share that load across the management team and a very strong next tier as well of grade eights and senior staff. And we have a very good Council then, a very good elected Council, elected last year, and we work very closely with them and in a very cooperative way. So, I'm glad to say the Council, from my perspective, certainly, and from the management team's perspective, works well, but we're not without issues. So, if you don't mind then, maybe Michael might start.

Mr. Michael Hand

Thanks, Barry. Michael Hand, I'm the Director of Finance with Westmeath County Council since June 2023, and I'm also responsible for information, communications, technology, health and safety, and property management.

Ms. Jackie Finney

Hi, I'm Jackie Finney, and I'm Director of Housing, Community, Arts and Libraries, and the Municipal District of Athlone-Moate. I've been with Westmeath since 2018, and I was previously in Offaly County Council, so in the sector about 20 years.

Ms. Deirdre Reilly

Hi, I'm Deirdre Reilly. I'm a Director of Services also, responsible for a district, the fire service, environment, climate, corporate and HR, and I've been a Director of Services, I suppose, for maybe two years permanently. I've been in Westmeath County Council for 20 years, before that I was in Dublin City Council, and I'm looking forward to today.

Ms. Jean Ryan

Hi, Jean Ryan, Director of Service. I have Planning and Transportation, Regeneration and Capital Projects, and Economic Development with Tourism. I'm coming up to my first year with Westmeath County Council as a Director, and previously I was in Offaly County Council for 18 years.

Miriam McDonald

Thank you all very much.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Okay, so Miriam, will I just go through the statement, and then we'll go back to yourselves. Is that okay?

Miriam McDonald

Yeah, that's perfect.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Okay, good morning, and thank you for this opportunity to address the National Oversight and Audit Commission. On behalf of Westmeath County Council, I would like to extend a warm welcome to the NOAC scrutiny process, and acknowledge the valuable role NOAC plays in promoting accountability and best practice across the local government sector. The intervening years since our last scrutiny engagement in October 2018, as documented in NOAC report number 33, have brought substantial changes to our organisation.

We have increased our activities in the areas of housing and climate action, and we have withdrawn further from water services. These and many other changes are reflected in our corporate plan 2024 to 2029, which was approved by our elected members in February of 2025. This plan provides a clear strategic framework that guides our service delivery and resource allocation across all functional areas.

We continue to work diligently to implement our various statutory functions, and deliver quality services to the citizens of Westmeath. Our performance in key areas demonstrates this commitment. We maintain one of the lowest housing vacancy rates nationally, have consistently strong debt collection rates, and our My Open Library initiative has proved highly successful, with plans for expansion to Athlone, Kilbeggan and Kinnegad.

However, I must acknowledge the ongoing challenges we face, particularly in workforce management. Despite our best efforts, staff retention and recruitment remain significant concerns across multiple departments. The competitive employment market and specialised skill requirements in local government create persistent pressures.

We are actively working to maintain an adequate workforce through innovative recruitment strategies and staff development programmes. I'm pleased to report that we are nearing completion of our strategic workforce plan, which represents our commitment to building an adaptable skilled workforce, capable of meeting both current service demands and future challenges. Implementation will require careful prioritisation, focusing on critical service delivery needs, statutory compliance and positions supported by external funding opportunities.

Of particular concern is the escalating cost of capital projects, which poses genuine risks to our financial sustainability. Construction inflation has created uncertainty in project delivery and budget management. We continue to monitor these risks closely and implement appropriate mitigation measures to protect the Council's financial position.

In conclusion, I'm confident that Westmeath County Council is in a strong position. We've built organisational resilience, demonstrated our capability in service delivery and positioned ourselves well to meet future challenges. Whilst we face ongoing pressures, our commitment to good governance, strategic planning and continuous

improvement ensures we remain capable of serving our community effectively and efficiently.

I look forward to our discussion today and to receiving NOAC's insights and recommendations for our continued development. Thank you.

Miriam McDonald

Thank you very much, Barry. Okay, we'll move on to some questions and I'll start with Brian.

Brian Cawley

Great, thank you, Chair. So good morning again, everybody. So just, I guess, by way of further brief introduction, NOAC operates through different Working Groups.

So Working Group 1 is the group that I chair. So broadly speaking, the kind of questions I'm just asking relate to the areas that Working Group 1 is responsible for. So that's just to give you kind of a framing of why I'm asking about particular areas.

It just happens to be they're the areas within our kind of ambit. And again, I appreciate very much that you're being hit with questions kind of that you're not necessarily anticipating. So if you need to come back to anything, feel free to do so.

The first thing I just wanted to start with was around the corporate plans. And Working Group 1 has recently conducted a review of the corporate plans of the new corporate plan cycle, which we're required to do. So every cycle of corporate plans, we review the plans.

And we've just completed that review, including Westmeath's and that report hasn't been published yet. But when it is published, you'll be pleased to see that there are examples of good practice that we pick out from Westmeath and that's, you to be congratulated on that. Indeed, you know, particularly areas like the extent to which you incorporate performance measurement in one of the appendices to the report is very helpful. And I think sets out kind of an example and a model that can be used in other local authorities.

So that's good. There was one particular aspect of the corporate plan that I wanted to ask you about. And in it, in the corporate plan, you mention that under the public sector human rights duty that your plan, you know, which is a requirement, obviously, to address that within the plan. But you indicate that you're going to carry out an assessment. I think you suggested that that might be done in the first six months of 2025. I just wanted to know where you're at with that in terms of your assessment of your current status with regards to public sector duty and where you intend to bring that.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

We haven't done it yet, Brian.

Brian Cawley

Yeah.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

To be honest now, yeah. We've had a bit of staff turnover in our corporate section and we have a new grade eight starting in the next, 29th, is it Deirdre?

Ms. Deirdre Reilly

29th of September.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

29th of September. And it's on the list for that new grade eight that starts to carry out that work and to see what it might discover or point out to us that we need to address. So unfortunately, we haven't commenced it yet for that reason. So we're almost there.

It's one of those human, one of those human resource challenges that we have. But the person that's coming in is an experienced person from Offaly who has been involved in HR up to now. So we expect that she'll hit the ground running and we'll get it done within a fairly short period of time.

Brian Cawley

Right. And would there be, okay, so you haven't been able to do anything on that yet, but would there be anything, any kind of comments you'd make in terms of how you would seek to address that public sector duty kind of more broadly within the context of the implementation of the plan? What I mean by that is, I suppose in some instances somebody can say, okay, we recognise we have a responsibility to address the public sector duty and kind of leave it to that side.

Whereas obviously better practice is to try and integrate that and address that within the various activities that you're carrying out, you know, whether that be housing or whatever. Just do you have any thoughts or comments on that?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Well, we'd like to identify, yeah, exactly that. What we might be able to take from the report that we'll have undertaken and build into our team plans as we do say for something like climate action, where the activities and the requirements under climate action are incorporated across the entire organisation. So to do, and disability is another example of that, which will come under this heading, but we're aware of the new disability strategy that government has issued.

We're looking at how we incorporate that and that'll be part of, across the entire organisation. We do have a strong system of team plans based on the management team plan and cascading down through the organisation and that's how we tend to do it. So we would hope that for 2026, we'd be able to incorporate those requirements and objectives across the organisation.

Brian Cawley

And thanks for that. And where does the responsibility lie then for oversight of implementation of, for example, that area?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Well, it will lie with the corporate section under Deirdre's directorate and under the new SEO that's coming into the corporate unit. And we have increased the number of SEOs that we have. It was the case that there was an SEO for corporate and HR.

So we split that out now because we recognised that the corporate workload was increasing significantly, as was the HR and it just wasn't possible to manage it properly with just one SEO over both. So we've increased our staffing resources in that area to cover this.

Ms. Deirdre Reilly

And I suppose just to add to that, I'm sorry, Brian. We're doing a review of our PMDS to align with the corporate plan. So there'll be some changes in relation to the pillars from previous corporate plans.

So we'll be capturing public, What I would imagine then is that the public sector duty will have its own column in that PMDS which will start at the ground level up. So everyone's reporting on what they're bringing to that. And that's how we capture it through the new PMDS system.

Brian Cawley

Yeah, good, good. Because like, as you know, it's an area of increasing focus and like in a very practical way, you know, that it's not just, I suppose, as some people might consider another additional governance burden, but it is a very practical thing in the context of, even the next area, I'm just going to come on to digitalisation and that nobody is left behind and that everybody has access to services in an equitable and fair way. So I think that's important that we address that. So I'll move on to the second area, if that's okay, which is about digitalisation or digitisation.

I'm never sure which of those is the correct phrase, I've seen both of them, but you make quite a few references to this area in your corporate plan, which again is very helpful. And you mentioned, for example, that you have seen increased rollout and use of digital services and that there's scope for further development of digital services in accordance with government's policy and the new digital and ICT strategy.

So we've been engaging, for example, with the LGMA around a new digital and ICT strategy and that's been rolled out, as you know. So what I just wanted to ask you was in relation to that area, of digitalisation and application of digital, particularly to customer facing services, are there any areas particularly that you think are going to give you particular gains, you know, as you move into this space? Are there areas where you think there's going to be very useful applications of digital applications?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

I think that there probably are, and other people might want to come in in a minute. One of our actions that I'm focused on at the moment is the replacement of our customer contact management system. It is old. It was installed about 14 or 15 years ago and it does need modernisation. And what we're what I'm seeking to do with that is to incorporate more intelligent tools within it that will work better for everybody, that will give people better responses, more timely responses, and allow us to manage

those customer queries much better than we're managing them at the moment. I hope as well that it will allow us to use tools that will help people who might be visually impaired or whatever as well.

And that we're conscious of that whole issue of people who don't use telephones and we all have members of our own families who are not au fait with the technology. And for that reason, we will maintain our traditional channels as well. And I suppose, unlike many other public services, we always answer the phone and we always get back to people and we get back to them in the way that they contacted us, whatever that happens to be or whatever is best for them.

And we're also continuously maintaining our public offices and our desks and so on for people who wish to come in and visit us for whatever reason. So we're very conscious of that. So that whole customer management piece is a place where I think we can do a lot more.

We have significant work, significant work to do in the housing area. In fairness, we're still on an old fashioned system. I'm not sure if Jackie wants to say anything about that, but we're very much paper-based in housing and it does mean that our services are slower, so to speak, and we're slower to respond than we could be. But that's going to be a significant challenge to upgrade that. I'm not sure if you want to say anything about that, Jackie.

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yeah, I mean, I know that there's currently a survey being done on housing services by the LGMA about the digitalisation of the services and what we have currently and where we'd like to go. So obviously, we're taking part in the Adjust system, which is the housing stock management. So that's been rolled out and that will greatly help our stock management real time, knowing, you know being able to carry out surveys of our own stock and it will also be used then for private house inspections.

And similarly, I suppose that's for our own internal staff, but also our contractors. So it'll help with data management and being able to provide information, even Council meetings, or to provide the information people require in terms of our own stock. But there's another step in that we'd like to, I suppose we would like to do more work, and that's the customer focus. And that would really be around housing applications. We are using the iHouse system. It is older.

I've used it myself and it's limited. But I suppose one of the things we're working on at the moment is around the rent assessment. And enabling people to carry out a rent assessment online.

So that's something we're working towards at the moment and we're engaging with the company. A number of local authorities are involved in that. So that would be another area we'd like to see to make, because it is, it's very labour intensive, carrying out a paper-based rent assessment.

And then with a view to down the line, hopefully that there would be an opportunity for people to be able to apply and send in their information online through using technologies. Now in saying that, and as Barry alluded to, there's lots of people who don't, who want to come in. They want to come to the desk.

You know, you talk about public sector duty and all that. To have people that somebody can come in and talk to. So both systems will operate.

But it should assist with the efficiency and hopefully kind of free up some of the staff time then from some of those very labour-intensive, paper-based workload.

Brian Cawley

Okay. And just one follow-up. The chair can call time on me when my time is up. But with regard, because you mentioned in your opening statement about the pressures on staffing and talent, which we're very aware of, and it is a real challenge. And I was just wondering in the kind of ICT digital area, how are you organised? What's your capacity currently?

You know, is that an area of challenge for you? And even the structure, do you have a separate structure for some local authorities? I think of digital officers or something like that under a separate structure to ICT. So I'm just interested in that area. You know, what's your structure? What's your capacity?

Mr. Michael Hand

If I can take that one, Brian, if you don't mind. Just as being responsible for ICT and anticipating questions of digitisation, I talked to my head of IT the other day. So first of all, we've set up a strategic work group, Deirdre's going to chair that for the senior coordination group, which is our grade eight and above level. We have invested in a system called Granicus.

And we've acquired a number of licenses in that in order to proceed with this. We have also identified two such resources in the strategic workforce plan that we're going to allocate directly to digitisation and digitisation of forms going forward, which will hopefully alleviate the pressures we are, we're under. We have currently launched just last week internally for travel and subsistence.

We want to do an internally first through the system to test it out to see how easy it is to use, see how it can assist in the development. And as we said, we'll go live and we get the two new resources in and Deirdre gets working with her working group and we'll be able to evaluate it further.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

But it is a challenge, Brian. There are two parts to it, I suppose. It's difficult to get people with the necessary skills at the level that we're employing them. They tend to get better paid in the private sector for those skills than we can pay. But at the same time, we keep going and we get people in. So that's one piece of the challenge.

The other challenge is, I think, working together across the sector to come up with tools that we can all use. And something I continuously raise at LGMA level that I'd like to see more happening there. I'd like to see a bit more productivity in terms of producing the things that we need to deliver our services better because we're all 31 local authorities are in the same business and we have common issues.

And it has been, it has been great to see the e-planning system rolled out across the sector and that was a great success. But we need more of that in terms of digitising something that we can all then put into place in our local authorities. So they're the two challenges that we have.

But we think there are great, there are great improvements and efficiencies we can gain by the full use of digitalisation, not forgetting the people who aren't interested. But even internally, in our own back office processes, we can save a lot of our manpower by employing better tools to do the things that we've traditionally done manually. And we're very focused on that.

Brian Cawley

Yeah, sure, thanks. And just one other area that I wanted to ask you about before I finish. And that's, I guess, just generally in relation to governance and service level agreements and that type of area.

So, for example, I think it's in Appendix D of your new corporate plan. You list, I think, about 26 different service level agreements of all different shapes, I suppose, and types. And you also, in the local government auditors service reports, the statutory audit report, they refer to four local authority companies that you have an interest in at the moment. So this is a very general question. I appreciate that. But I'm just interested in the governance of these arrangements.

So, for example, service level agreements are some of those, all of those ones that require ongoing oversight, review, and this type of thing. Or, or do they just kind of roll on and operate on their own? And then in terms of local authority companies, where you have an interest, you know how does that work? Again, in general terms, board representation, oversight scrutiny, if that makes sense.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Yeah, the SLAs, the SLAs generally, service level agreements tend to roll on. Yeah, and we're conscious of them continuously and the agreements that we have, obviously. But they tend to come up for review every two or three years.

And for example, we're currently entering into a new SLA with Enterprise Ireland for the operation of the local enterprise office. So it's been through a process. And then we get to the end of that process and we have an agreement then on the SLA and we operate in accordance with that then for the period.

And the other ones are the same. Then we have agreements with other local authorities as well on various things. And again, they come up for review every few years.

And what we find is that when they're within the sector, they work well, there's good faith between all the various actors and issues don't arise. The companies then, we have, as you say, four different companies that we own effectively. But we have boards in place for each of them.

And we're represented then on the board. My own preference in terms of these boards is that we would have kind of a controlling interest almost in them between ourselves and the elected members because they are companies that are owned by the County Council. And that's our preferred option.

Not for, not because we want to control the thing, but that in the long run, we have enough control if things go wrong, we can take action to rectify any issues should that happen. So that's the advantage of that. And that works well for us.

Those boards meet obviously, regularly. We get the accounts every year. There, We've employed professional auditors and so on. We've got to subvent them, all of them. So we're very conscious of them from a financial perspective. And we're very conscious then as well of the services that they provide.

And we have those companies because it's an efficient way of delivering services. And that's the reason we have them. So they work well for us by and large. We have had issues that we've had to address and we've addressed them. But we're conscious that there's always a risk with those companies and we monitor them carefully and we're represented on all boards.

Brian Cawley

And do you have, again, I suppose, maybe not a service level agreement, but with regard to subvention, which would have the most significant subvention and how then do you monitor you know basically what you get in return for the subvention?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Yeah, the most significant is Athlone Arts and Tourism, which looks after Athlone Castle and the Luan Gallery and the artist studios in Athlone. We have a general manager in place and the board, I sit on the board and Jackie chairs the board as the director for Athlone. And we have our quarterly meetings with a general manager in place.

We go through the expenditure and the income on a line-by-line basis at least twice a year. And now we're doing it for the purpose of the budget in 2026. And the manager reports kind of to Jackie, on a day-to-day basis, we work very closely then with other agencies, but we have, we have very strong oversight of that company on a day-to-day basis.

Brian Cawley

And are they separately audited?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

They are separately audited, each of them, yeah and we have an AGM every year, which is attended by all the members, and the auditors are appointed at that AGM.

Brian Cawley

Okay, great.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

and the accounts are presented.

Brian Cawley

Yeah, great, thank you very much.

Miriam McDonald

Thank you, Brian. Apologies for my timekeeping. Okay, I'll hand over to Anne now.

Anne Haugh

Okay, hello again, everybody. I'm representing Working Group 2, which is primarily the performance indicators as such, and it's probably the piece that I suppose NOAC would be most well-known for, is the performance indicator report annually. So myself and my colleague Noel down towards the end there will also have some questions around this.

No surprise that I'm going to focus the initial couple of questions around the housing area. So first, I suppose, on a positive note, very low rates of vacancy rates in Westmeath. And I think you're about, you're at 1.23% vacant of your total stock at the end of 2024, and also very good results in 2023 as well. The national average in 2024 is 2.75%, so significantly less, I suppose. And linked to that then, obviously, is the cost as well of re-tenanting. And again, about 50% of the national average, your cost to turn around dwellings is at around just over 16,000, as opposed to almost 32,000.

So I suppose you've mentioned before that one of the, back in 2018, during the scrutiny process at that stage, that part of the reason for those good results is as a result of engaging a reserve, a contractor on reserve and also significant investment. Is that still the case, I suppose, is the question? You're still getting continuously good results in this area. Is the same system prevailing? And maybe you might just outline what it is, Jackie, it's yourself, what that is, because it's something, obviously, that we'd see that other local authorities maybe should be learning from.

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yeah, I suppose there is a focus on it, on the voids and the turnaround and the value for money. And it's very topical, because at the Council meeting yesterday, we, I had to present, I suppose, a report on housing maintenance. And we would have referred to the indicators where, I suppose, we're comparing ourselves not only with other counties, but with ourselves, you know.

So it is, the direction is, you know, we are going in the right direction in terms of the vacancy rate and, you know, the turnaround time, which is also something we're very conscious of. So we do have, the reason we kind of did an analysis really in the last couple of months about, I suppose, the system and the way we operate the housing maintenance system and our, you know, the turnaround voids was to look at the contractors who were using, we're going out to, we're out to tender now for a general services contractor. And we have two other contractors then in terms of plumbing and heating and windows and doors.

We have staff then dedicated to really managing those contracts. We have written into the contracts, obviously, you know, the timeframes, the turnaround timeframes, reporting. And it's important for us to have up-to-date information as well in front of the councillors once a month.

You know, it's a high priority for them, especially at the moment, a housing crisis, you don't want to see houses lying vacant. So I suppose we're always kind of measuring ourselves on the turnaround time. We did do an analysis about changing the system, maybe looking at more internal staff doing it or going with the current system we have.

And really, when we looked at it in detail in terms of the cost and our performance, we're happy with the system that we have set up. And we're happy that we have the staff in place to really put pressure on the contractors. And we are getting value for money.

And I think we're seeing that even, you know, in the average cost per house. I was, you know, looking at figures for this year. And we've turned around, last year, we turned around 44 voids.

This year, to the end of quarter three, we'd done 40. And there's another 10 coming in now in the next. So we'll have 50 in the next couple of weeks.

So we're managing to get more houses turned around. Our costs are coming in around the same. And our turnaround time at the moment is 14 weeks average.

Now that may change by the end of the year when you add in, you know, average it out over. But we feel that it is working well for us. We're getting good cooperation from our contractor.

And there when we go to tender, the County is two big districts. So the way it is procured is that we can get two separate contractors. But if somebody pulls out, we still have it written into the procurement process that, you know, we can have the opportunity to take on the contractor.

So we've written in things into the procurement process to ensure that we're not left without somebody and that houses aren't being left sitting. And that's based on experience from previous years.

Anne Haugh

So you don't actually have a full framework where you pull off of various contractors? You use a contractor for each side of the County?

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yeah, yeah. So we don't have a framework. We go to tender for, for yeah.

Anne Haugh

And how much of the turnaround time do you think, and the fact that you've got much reduced turnaround time and reduced costs, is related to the spec of the works that you're putting out? You know, is your spec any lower than, or is it to minimum rented standards? You know, is there has that any bearing on the results?

Ms. Jackie Finney

I know it's obviously to standard and it's certainly not lower than other counties. I would have experienced it other. And even just in the, I suppose the costs that we are, you know, like it's in 2024, it was 16,000 average.

So it's not on the lower end and they're definitely brought to a standard. What we would find is say some voids, and we have a number this year where people have been living in them for a long time and then, you know, they may have passed away or they moved. So some of those houses, they, you know, they're over 30 years old.

They do require a good bit of work to bring them back up in terms of the electrics, obviously the heating system. So some of them, they would require a lot of work. And I know of a number that are underway at the moment where it's up to 70,000 perhaps to bring them back into use.

Anne Haugh

And you mentioned when you were speaking with Brian there about the adjust asset management system and you're engaged with that process and you'll be doing your stock condition service, I presume. Do you think that the implementation of that system is going to change anything in terms of the way you're operating your maintenance currently and your turnaround of voids?

Ms. Jackie Finney

I'm hoping it'll improve it, especially in terms of getting the data on how quickly houses are done, because at the moment we're relying on the contractors are giving us the information saying the house is finished. We have people then who go out and check, but it's not really closed in iHouse until the invoice comes in. So our turnaround times may actually be, may actually be slightly better for the general maintenance.

Obviously, if it's urgent and emergency works, they're you know turned around within the time frames within the tenant handbook for safety reasons. I am hopeful, I would hope that it would improve it. And again, it's written into all the procurement processes that contractors would also be adjust enabled. You know so the data will, it will be real-time information. And I think for the purposes of, you know, there's, we have a lot of houses, so for knowing the condition of our stock and being able to put our fingers to exactly what condition, what was done last on the house, when was it done, it'll be much quicker and easier rather than maybe having to root back through files. So some of that workload, that staff, you know internally, there may you know, may be efficiencies there. I would definitely think so, yeah.

Anne Haugh

And in terms of the procurement of the contractors, there should be two main contractors each year then obviously divided up in the county. Is there, is there a variance in those contractors? When you do, you procure annually on that or is it rolled over or what?

Ms. Jackie Finney

It was about, I'd say it's for a two years or up to 2 million is the limit, so whichever is earlier. So it's about two years. And as I say, there is provision for two separate contractors.

However, what happened in the past was the contractor that took lot B or lot two ended up pulling out quite early on. So it meant then we had to go through a process to get somebody else. So in this procurement process, we've ensured that we've written in that we can call on the next one or, or that there will be provision for a contractor to take over directly.

Declan Breathnach

Could I just ask a quick question supplementary to that? How unique is that contract in relation to other local authorities being aware of it? We were dealing with a local authority quite recently where they were telling us that a massive issue getting plumbers to contract.

And while I understand the contract situation has to go to a central procurement, have you shared what seems to be unique based on what you've said here this morning with other local authorities? Because again, it would be clear to me, we have all of the vans of plumbers and carpenters and whatever, they're all moving into the city. And I suppose the question really is, how do you ensure that you get the local contractors who are available, who are on hand in overcoming the situation?

Because it appears to me that certainly there are issues right across the country in relation to even local contractors being able to tender or being aware. So maybe you might comment on that, please.

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yeah, and again, this came up and it came up at the Council meeting yesterday about local contractors, yeah. So, so as I say, there's three main contracts, the general services, the plumbing and heating and the windows and doors. But then there's also local tender, local competitions or smaller competitions, which would bring in maybe builders and contractors that wouldn't have the scale to be able to operate at what we need in terms of the general maintenance.

We do share our method with the, especially the Midland local authorities, we'd be talking to them regularly. I know in Offaly, I think there was a framework, they pull from a framework, slightly different. So we would share stories.

I suppose we're all competing. The general contractor that we had also worked in other counties, but they're so they're up a scale and they would use local. They would use local suppliers as well.

So I suppose there is an opportunity for the local businesses to be able to tender for the smaller jobs, but there's also an opportunity that they may be subcontracted by the main contractor So, yeah.

Anne Haugh

And that's my question.

Ms. Jackie Finney

That does happen.

Anne Haugh

The main one subsidises. And just on the asset management system and the stock condition service, have you commenced your surveys or what's your plan for?

Ms. Jackie Finney

No, we haven't commenced yet. Yeah, we're just in the, there was an email going around about our points of contact now for the address for training.

Anne Haugh

And it's going to be done over a number of years, I presume.

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yes, yeah yeah.

Anne Haugh

So then just moving on then to H5, which was the private rental inspections. And I suppose that's one area by comparison then, that you're falling behind on. I think it's 880 or six, it fell from 2023 to 2024, from 818 to 608.

And I suppose that's, it's far removed from the national mean as well in that. And so there seems to be a trend of decreasing. And I suppose the first question really is, what do you attribute that to?

And is this a resource issue as well, as you mentioned earlier on?

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yeah. So, and we're very conscious of that. Yeah.

And I know that there were comments back on it. So last, in 2024, it had, we had fallen back, but we're confident now that this year we've got back on track. And it was, it was a staffing issue.

There was a gap there. And we've kind of rearranged the housing team in that area, put more resources in terms of clerks of works inspections. And also there was a change in the admin team.

And there also the policy, the protocol is brought in, you know the procedure is brought in. So it's kind of it's increased the efficiency of it, it has improved the efficiency of it. And we're on target really, I think the target for 2025 is 1,325.

Anne Haugh

And that would be the 25%, is it?

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yeah. And then by week 37, which was the 14th, we had 665 inspections carried out. So we're in a healthier place.

And we're, you know, there's a good system in place there as well, in terms of the admin and the organising of it. And then the staff to go out and carry out the inspection.

Anne Haugh

And it is your own internal staff that are doing the inspections. Are they doing it in

addition to other duties or have you assigned staff specifically to the inspections?

Ms. Jackie Finney

So there's two staff and they're pretty much specifically to inspections. You know, sometimes if there's resource issues, they may get pulled away, but no, they're pretty much full time. And I know that other counties have contracted it out, but it's working well, managing it ourselves. And we're able to get through the workload.

Anne Haugh

Okay. Okay. Just moving on then to the area of homelessness. And again, this is an area that has seen the number of long-term homeless adults figures increase significantly from 2023 to 2024. I think it's almost doubled, I think, the numbers of long-term homeless in your homelessness figures. Is there a particular reason for that that you're aware of?

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yeah, there's two reasons really for that. Firstly, in previous years, the data that was returned was on the basis of the booking that was made. This year, there was a greater analysis of the individuals and of the cases in terms of their cumulative time in homeless services.

So I would say this year, it's more accurate, you know based, probably, because of that greater emphasis put on the analysis and going back through the cases. That's one reason.

Anne Haugh

Is that your own analysis you're speaking of there in terms of you've done a more deeper analysis of history?

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yeah, rather than just taken it from past, yeah, and went back through it, yeah. And then, and I think as we're the lead agency for the Midlands region, I think the other counties were following the same method. And the other reason was, there was a number of properties, a good number of properties that were due to come in before the end of the year.

It's in Charlestown in Mullingar, and they actually fell into 2025. So while they were finished, really substantially complete, the approved housing body wasn't able to take the tenancies until 2025. And there was a good number of families who were in homeless accommodation who were to be accommodated in those properties.

So they were a bit longer.

Anne Haugh

Okay, and in terms of the analysis, so would that suggest then that the figures that have been given to PASS in the last, or to the PASS system in the last number of years were calculated differently?

Ms. Jackie Finney

Well, I think the way they were analysed in previous years was it was the date of the booking, taken from PASS, from the system, you know, where you book people into emergency accommodation. Whereas when you, I suppose, to look at each case individually, it requires you to go back and look at all of the cases. And I think in some of the other counties, I think Offaly's has gone up as well.

So they were going back through all the cases to see where they were before. And over the last six months, you know, cumulatively, have they been in for six months or more in the last year. So there may have been a break, you know, somebody might have moved out for a few months or gone home and then rebooked back in. So I think it was a bit more of a deeper analysis into the cases and where they were.

Anne Haugh

Okay, so just moving on from housing, I just have a question on the environment area before I hand over to Noel. So it's just in relation to the, it's E2A, it's the number, the total sum of pollution cases in respect of which a complaint was made. And it was only nine for 2024.

Sorry, I'm looking at you, Deirdre. It was only nine, which is the lowest by, by a lot really in terms of the rest of the sector. The average was 216. Is there any particular reason why you only received nine pollution complaints?

Ms. Deirdre Reilly

Well, I don't really know, to be honest, against the rest of the counties, but these are cases as reported to us and we have them all, they're on an environment report.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Are we misunderstanding? Can we just see which one you're speaking of?

Anne Haugh

It's E2A. Now, I don't actually have E2A here in the figures. Do you have it there?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

It's 880 is our total number of pollution cases in respect of which a complaint was made during 2024. That's 880.

Ms. Deirdre Reilly

So nine on hand, that's nine carried over.

Anne Haugh

It's the nine on hand at the end of the year, is it?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Carried over, yeah. That's because all of the other ones were closed.

Anne Haugh

Yes, okay, perfect, thank you. No, that's fine, that's fine. So I think, Declan?
Or Noel, sorry, yeah, I think Noel is coming in.

Noel Harrington

Thank you very much. Thanks, Miriam. And thanks to Barry and your team for attending this morning.

I'm going to stick with the performance indicators and the roads, the roads section. And generally speaking, there'll be two parts to this really, but the first one will be focusing on a good news story, I think, with respect to the performance with the regional, local and the tertiary roads. And the indicators suggest that you're top of the grid, second best in the country, I think is what it is.

So we'd be anxious to know if you have any specific policy initiative towards the roads upkeep in Westmeath and you know how you manage to keep going to a high standard. And if you have a specific policy in that, is it something that you do differently maybe to other local authorities, maybe local authorities that you're aware of, we'd be kind of interested in that one.

Ms. Jean Ryan

Okay, well, I suppose it's keen, the focus I suppose was to keep, to tackle getting, keeping the numbers low in the low PSI rating. So the one to four and the five to six and focusing then on keeping a steady, a steady standard in the next category on our regional and local roads. Having the balance then between across the county as well and ensuring, but mainly working with the RMO system and the MRL and ensuring that we're looking, targeting the roads that require it.

Ensuring that we're using the correct category, whether it's maintenance, strengthening or resurfacing and really working with the system and targeting the roads that need it and then keeping with the maintenance programmed and not being maybe diverted sort of to areas of want or whatever, but just kind of keeping with the figures and the data to ensure we're using the best, the finances is used the best as possible.

Noel Harrington

Are there multi-annual programmes I presume? Do you allocate the funds in a multi annual programme?

Ms. Jean Ryan

Yes, we have a multi-annual programme. We have a small contract and a minors work contract as well.

Noel Harrington

And in terms of the grading of the roads, the PSI grades you know working with the RMO, do you outsource that work or do you do that in-house with your, with the engineering staff?

Ms. Jean Ryan

The surveying work?

Noel Harrington

Yeah.

Ms. Jean Ryan

We outsource some of it and then for the local roads, it's in tertiary roads we do some works ourselves.

Noel Harrington

Tertiary roads are done in-house and the regional and local roads are outsourced to an independent company who then report back to the RMO and you get the figures back from the RMO then and that feeds into your programme of works then as in the next year.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Just to add to what Jean has said about your first, in response to your first question, Noel, there's a long tradition in Westmeath of investing in roads going back over decades and a decision was made by county engineer back probably 40 to 50 years ago to put only Macadam on regional roads and that built up then over the years. And as a result of that investment over decades, our regional roads are in really good condition. Apart from one, unfortunately, between CastlePollard and going on to Cavan and Finnea, that road is one that we still have to invest a lot more money in now to keep it in good order.

But the rest of the regional roads are laid with Macadam to give a very good ride quality to the motorist. They're safe, they're much easier to maintain because of that investment over decades. And the members put in extra money as well into roads every year.

Noel Harrington

Yeah, yeah I can appreciate that. And that ties me nicely into a question as well, the grading in the KPIs, like we say, whether it's in-house or it's the outsource, does that broadly match, we'll say, the work that's done in the Chamber, the feedback from the members and maybe also maybe the feedback from the public in terms of satisfaction or not with the standards of roads? Would you see them, would there be a correlation between the PSI figures and, now I know it's unscientific, but

Mr. Barry Kehoe

There is, there is.

Noel Harrington

You should be able to pick up on that?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

We feel that in the cul-de-sacs in particular, which are the tertiary roads that give Jean a lot of hardship, where we have over 500 cul-de-sac roads in the county and it is difficult to maintain them and we don't get around to them all because

Noel Harrington

And just for the record, they're public roads.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

They are, they are, yeah.

Noel Harrington

And I just, without going too far into Miriam's area on the customer services, again, this is something, it's completely unscientific, but we have come across local authorities who have scored so high in a whole lot of different sectors in the KPIs and wouldn't have done maybe so well on the road side and the customer services fell below the average because - no, I'm not saying because of it. And some local authorities who have a very, very good KPI on the non-national roads do very well in the customer service figures. Do you see a correlation between - look, there's no science behind this, but it's something that I can see. Roads being up to scratch and satisfaction with the public. And I don't think, what I don't want to do is alienate your directorship with every other director.

Ms. Jean Ryan

It doesn't come up, it doesn't tend to come up in the Chamber, particularly at Council meetings, the way I would have maybe seen in the past with problems with peat roads or whatever. It really doesn't and I do think there's a good, strong engagement really with the section and customers and through the elected members as well. So that's my experience of it in the last year anyway.

It hasn't really. You don't hear as much complaints about the roads.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Anecdotally, that's what I'm talking about. I often hear people saying that the roads in Westmeath are very good and that they know when they cross the boundary, without casting any aspersions at anyone else, but they do say that to me regularly. It is something I have experienced.

That the roads in Westmeath are very good yeah. The issue that's arising for us now is public lighting, which is a bit like roads really and it's a challenge for us to keep the lights on. You know and just in fairness to your point, the reputation of a local authority can be damaged by something like roads or public lighting now, which is an emerging issue.

Noel Harrington

That's where I was coming in. The second part of the roads PI I want to focus on is maybe something that's a little bit more difficult in terms of the results, and that is the road openings and the licensing. And Westmeath, now I don't think any local authority, and it presents a lot of difficulties for I think every local authority that we've met, trying to achieve the 40% target set by the Department of Transport.

Westmeath is kind of, has gone to, we'll say half of what the national average is. And obviously there's challenges there. Can you give us a little bit of a background or context to the challenges you're facing with the inspections?

Ms. Jean Ryan

Yes, so particularly, yes, for the inspections for the road open licence. So this is the new KPI this year, and when we identified and we were low in that area. And we identified it really was a resourcing issue with the clerical works in the municipal districts, with the workload they had on just to give the priority to the road opening licence.

So we identified that as an issue. We identified it in the strategic workforce plan that we needed additional clerk works in both MDs, and that has been addressed and they are about to start. And their primary focus will be on the inspections for the road opening licence. They'll have other duties as well, but that will be their primary focus.

Noel Harrington

And in terms of the licensing, there's like there's four grades, there's a T1, 2, 3, and 4 subdivisions in the licence. Is there any one particular area that presents more problems than another one?

Ms. Jean Ryan

The closeout inspections, I suppose. That was to be the key one that we'd really like to improve on.

Noel Harrington

That's before the guarantee period.

Ms. Jean Ryan

Before the guarantee period, yes.

Noel Harrington

And that's critical time for supervision and sign-off.

Ms. Jean Ryan

Yeah, and the long-term benefits of it as well. Aside from the actual KPI, the long-term benefit of carrying out those inspections is important and will benefit us as well in the long run.

Noel Harrington

So we have the figures up to 24. Is there any better news for 2025 with that perspective? I know that you mentioned that you're putting in resources or planning, but have you seen any improvements on that for 2025?

Ms. Jean Ryan

I have seen, we just got notification here in September and there was slight improvement for Westmeath for 2025. But as I say, the two clerk of works are only about to start. So towards the end of the year and then into 2026, we should see significant improvement in that area.

Noel Harrington

And again, it's one of those things that the public kind of touch upon quite a lot. And it becomes topical, I suppose. And something that, and it's something for us, we were trying to grapple with this new PI as well. So we appreciate very much your feedback on that. It does mirror what we're hearing around the countryside, around the sector in terms of other local authorities. So we're very grateful for that.

Ms. Jean Ryan

Ok.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

From an infrastructure perspective, it's very welcome that that's included now in the performance indicators because it brings a focus to it and we've responded to that by putting in two additional clerical works to cover the County and we're working on this at national level as well. We're bringing Uisce Éireann in under the road licensing system, we now have an interim agreement with Uisce Éireann around road opening and we would hope to have Uisce Éireann within the full road opening system by maybe the middle of next year. The result of that is that we'll have additional income as well which will cover the cost of the inspections that we need to carry out and the objective being to maintain the asset in the best possible condition so I think everything is moving in the right direction now in terms of managing road openings, protecting the roads and again giving a better public service.

Miriam McDonald

Okay great thank you and hand over to Declan now.

Declan Breathnach

Thanks chair. I don't chair working group three, Miriam does but Miriam's taking the chair today. I'm in charge of asking the questions, I've been asked to be brief and I will try. It's clear that all the various customer service reports over the years in Westmeath have been set well above the national average particularly high scored well and yet you talk about an archaic customer management system and the need to improve it.

There are three questions relating to this. Can you tell us what customer service initiatives you have in place that you think helped with positive results in both the NOAC and the LGMA surveys? Two, have you rolled out other initiatives since the NOAC survey was taken and can you elaborate on them and give us feedback if possible? And thirdly, do you conduct your own customer service surveys to track customer satisfaction and can you please elaborate on them? I'm conscious of those three questions.

I just want to, on foot of your presentation so that I won't come back in but maybe some or all might answer the question. I noted in your opening report you talked about innovative recruitment. I'd like you to explain because every local authority has that

difficulty yet the word innovation sticks out at me and I'd like to know.

I want to quickly deal with the issue of again your excellent rates of collection and while it's not particularly on this particular group I just don't want to come back in. I want you to elaborate on how you're dealing with your rent arrears which again appear to be exceptionally high when you have a situation where over 440,000 customers in the ESB are in arrears. I'm reading for local authorities in relation to rent have arrears of up on 4 million in some cases and how are you so successful in, you know dealing with rent arrears when it's clear that other local authorities are not. And finally from my point of view for today Working Group 4 had a particular question that just didn't get to which was the electoral register and your data cleansing that was referred to in relation to working with Dublin City Council. Can you tell us a little bit more about that when you get a chance at some stage and how that cooperation and strategy is working and what it really is about because it doesn't, it's not explained and I hope chair that I've dealt with all my questions in less than ten minutes.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Customer service does yeah just, there are a good few questions there Declan. We'll try and answer them as best we can and the most appropriate people. Customer service I suppose is what we try to do, all the time is make sure that we get back to people in accordance with our customer service charter. So that's really the critical thing that we revert the people with an answer whether that answer is positive, negative, neutral or we'll get back to you again but that's the culture in the organisation that we do get back to people and we have that and maybe Jackie would say more about that and it's sorry Deirdre yeah. Yeah, I'm not good on names. Maybe if you don't mind Deirdre maybe and about the initiatives on recruitment as well like the job fairs and so on.

Ms. Deirdre Reilly

Okay I suppose just to speak on customer service as Barry said we have it is a culture you know to always phone people back if you get an email you can't answer you acknowledge it that type of stuff, but I think also and where we fare really well is in our consultation. So when we're doing a project and it's going to affect the public in some way we do a ground-up consultation so, that's working through our community sections and our regen and capital projects. And for example last year we did a consultation on a proposed Mullingar regional sports complex and we would have got in excess of 700 responses back on that.

I think that's why we, you know we're always out there in the media, we're talking to people, we're good at doing our public relations and press releases and things like that. So I think that you know and then the fact that we do answer the questions. I can't point to any initiatives right now in relation to customer service reports, but we are doing well but I think it really is just the culture in the organisations.

And I suppose you know how we're working with our elected members as well in respect of that you know and that when somebody asks them a question they ask us, and it comes back you know, and like we were speaking earlier, Brian you know about public sector duty that and their integrity and honesty and things like that, I think that that fills into that.

In relation to innovative recruitment and so this year we we're finding that you know people who know about working in the local authority at an earlier age are more likely to end up with us, at a later stage in their lives. So this summer we did a student recruitment and we picked a couple of sections and we recruited our students and we had we had, we interviewed them when they came in and we interviewed them as they exited and we're going to do a look back on that,

Also we're starting to, at the end of last year we went to a Chamber of Commerce event in relation to employment, local employment opportunities things like that so we took a table at that and really that's just to get the word out there what local authorities do. At a local level we're hoping to, in the future work with TUS because obviously now we've a Tech University in Athlone and we're hoping to be able to work with graduates from that and we're going to go to one of their career fairs in early 2026.

We're also starting on a programme of apprenticeships. We first offered them internally to our own staff that's at district level the outdoor staff so for block laying or you know that type of work. We also have some graduate programmes through the LEO and I was just speaking to my colleagues here this morning about that and two of our graduates have now attained employment within our own structures at technician level. So they came in you know as graduates and after the programme they've managed to, to get a role with us so it's really about that.

And yeah I guess it's it is good to get out there early I think and we also have a strong engineering team there and we have a sector of our, of our SCG group or senior coordination group, this again is the head of sections and that group meets every six weeks. So the grade eights meet with me every six weeks and we talk about these initiatives and again they're the people and they see people in their own sections to implement an initiative. So the engineers worked on it, it's called steps and again it's about it's about secondary school students, they come into the library we picked an afternoon we took the fire service, we took the engineers you know hard hats uniforms you know try to entice the school children and let them know you know what local authority does. So, so that's really what we're doing we're just trying to do a few things on the ground in relation to that, the next thing there was was rent arrears and I might just, you take that.

Mr Michael Hand

Just in relation to the rent arrears, Declan thanks for bringing it up but I wouldn't like to say that we're better than anybody else but there's a couple of things that I'm jotting down here that I believe we do, to help things. The first thing I've down here is we champion the methods of payment to try and make it easier for the individual. There's no different than the other local authority. We in 2023, we went live with MyCoCo which is basically an online payment system and that's proved beneficial. We offer the household budget, we offer online, we offer counter the same as everybody else. I think we just championed it well. We have a great team there that interacts with the tenants on an ongoing basis to try and keep them. as soon as we have a system in place, which we call our PI indicator report as it starts to fall off after three or four weeks we make the phone calls so we try get in early to ensure we keep them on track.

The second thing here is I'm thinking is becoming more difficult, because we carry out a rent review every year to try and reassess the rents to make sure that people aren't being overcharged and undercharged. With that it's becoming more, more and more

coming online, we're building social houses, we're trying to tackle the homeless so with the never increasing rent base it's become more difficult we're doing well but I have to be honest I think the one thing we do well in Westmeath is we actively engage our legal team when things aren't going right and unfortunately the way to go between you bring people through the legal system and publicity gets out there, word gets out there and says listen these guys are, mean business so. The last thing I was going to mention is not specifically rents but loans. We had a landmark case in Westmeath where we re-possessed a house for a loan and no other local that we were aware of in the region had done it, we successfully got the loan to transferred it it's in estate in Athlone and it's now social housing stock. Thanks.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

You asked Declan about whether we carry out our own customer services surveys. We haven't in the recent past, we did some time ago but not in the recent past. We, no more than any other local authority, we get a lot of feedback because of the number of meetings we have with elected members and so on but there probably still is a need to repeat that at local level. There's the customer sentiment one that we that was done recently but we don't, we haven't done our own for some time but something we'll consider certainly. In terms of data cleansing then on the electoral register, and we're actively engaged on that at the minute. We've put additional staff into that unit with support from the Department and we're grateful for that, and we're dealing with it. I'm not sure if you want to say anything more about it Deirdre. In terms of duplicates, people who are gone going through the register line by line effectively and hopefully it'll make a difference, but it is a challenge to keep the register up to date with the amount of new people coming into the area and change that's that's afoot and it's something we're going to have to continuously resource really because at the end of the day it's the foundation of our democracy so it is it is important. Yeah.

Ms. Deirdre Reilly

Yeah, just not not much really just to say that we have the designated staff member, and we've gone through the first stage of that cleansing process and we've been identified to go through the next stage, and I think that's across-county, working with the county on that and going out and meeting different community reps and PPNs and things like that in relation to the electoral register. So yeah, it's working well, and we have also, sought we have also identified another staff member for that for next year.

Miriam McDonald

Okay great, thank you. I'll hand over to Kathleen.

Kathleen Holohan

Ok so just again in the sort of customer service area and, I suppose perception—the public's perception from the various reports—are that you're recognised as being fair and equal, and having improved access for minorities and those with disabilities, and being age friendly. I suppose wondering if there are any specific initiatives or projects that you've undertaken that would have resulted in that sort of perception from the community?

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yeah, I suppose there are a couple of areas. And Barry just whispered to me libraries is one that would jump to mind. The Our Mullingar library is the Library of Sanctuary that was got, was awarded last year. And the libraries are very engaged so—we have three My Open libraries, and there will be three more My Open Libraries.

They're also engaged across working with younger people various initiatives, working with older people you know across the libraries, in terms of groups that would come in and initiatives that they would have run.

You know working with different groups, and I suppose some of the new community groups, as well the PPN as well. The, you know, our community section would work with—there's 800 odd groups now aligned with the PPN, so a huge number of groups. And I think that might feed back to some of the general customer services satisfaction, as well because the staff from the Council are out there and working in the communities— and you know through Town Centre First, through you know our grants, residents' associations, working with tidy towns, from the biodiversity officer, to the Safe Community section.

We also have our Local Authority Integration Team, which is very active. And we have, have our project workers and another worker due to join, and they're working within the centres across the county. And we have our Community Integration Forum, which meets every six weeks which includes all agencies and voluntary organisations working with new communities as well.

So really, I suppose another thing just in terms of Age Friendly and working with older people. We have our Age Friendly Alliance—I was very very involved in that, as Chair, the Chair of the committee the alliance. And then we have you know you can just kind of a practical on a practical basis, I brought it up yesterday at the Council meeting where the members are scheduling municipal district works for housing. We would have taken on to do some of the kind of outdoor maintenance work for older persons' dwellings, just because we're conscious of the for older people, it's more difficult, whereas for lots of tenants, we're saying: "You have to carry out certain work yourselves." But for older people, it's more difficult. So initiatives like that and then the councillors would obviously raise them and ask about them so then you know people become aware of them so I think I mean you probably have more to add.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Just in terms of customer service then, what I feel—and what I think I share with colleagues and the entire team—is the importance of maintaining the public realm has been really important, and it's something we've put a lot of resources into and we demand a very high standard of maintenance in terms of weed control, litter, signs, signage, just green areas being well maintained, the approaches to our towns being well maintained and villages.

So I think that emphasis on public realm maintenance is really important because it's what people see every day, and it's what people see when they come to visit the county.

When people go outside their own house, they are in the public realm, and we're responsible for it. So we've put additional resources into that area in recent years. It's insatiable really in terms of the demands that are there, but at the same time it's something we've got to do. I think that makes a difference to people's satisfaction with the local authority.

Kathleen Holohan

Just another in terms of —obviously you're aware of the good practice seminar that we organise—and you had submitted a project around the Athlone Urban Design and Regeneration Framework Project. And we've sort of been inundated with projects for this year, so we just weren't able to include it. But there might be something for next year. You might just maybe tell us how that project is going, and if there's anything we'll say that you've learned from it that might be applied in other towns in terms of successes?

Ms. Jackie Finney

Okay, well the Athlone Urban Regeneration Project was very successful, and actually we were up for a planning award on Thursday night with the project. I think the key to all of our regeneration projects, I suppose, is again back to that customer piece where we do a lot of engagement and public consultation, and we do take the input from the various groups before, before we engage on it.

Particularly let's say in the likes of Athlone in the centre of Athlone, it was very important to engage with the business people there, as well it was going to greatly impact and one of the success stories there was the level of turnaround of vacancies in shops—and the refilling of shops and businesses coming back to where the public realm was. And of course, another key piece is the quality of the materials that we put into, into the projects.

We have our master plan for Athlone, and Phase One is complete. And we'd be hoping, when there's further urban regeneration funding, that we'd be able to commence on the west side and Phase Two of that project.

But I do feel just in general with our regeneration projects, we do do a lot of engagement. We do try and facilitate as many community groups if we're looking at a public realm or a building. We have two at the moment under Rural Regeneration—we have two older buildings coming back into the community in Kinnegad and Castlepollard and it's key there was engagement with the various community groups, the tidy towns, ensuring that they all had a speak into it, and a space in the buildings if they needed to really opening it up, looking at accessibility, changing areas within those buildings as well. So I think that is key to the successful public realm.

Kathleen Holohan

And is all that consultations we'd say done before any we'd say statutory ones that you have to do? And does that benefit you when you do do the statutes?

Ms. Jackie Finney

Yes, so we do an initial engagement—an initial survey—and generally get people's feedback. That then formulates into the documents that would then go through the statutory process. So we always do that early engagement as well.

And Just to say, in Westmeath the consultation portal works very well. It was one when I started in Westmeath, I was really impressed with. And people actively engage with it, and it is does get a lot of use online. That's consult.ie—it's very good.

Kathleen Holohan

Okay I'll hand you over to Miriam.

Miriam McDonald

Okay, thank you Kathleen ,Okay, Margaret.

Margaret Lane

Yeah, thanks very much. I'm the chair of Working Group Four, which is Financial Management and Performance. And the first thing I want to talk to you about is the internal audit report for 2023, which was published in 2024. There's a number of recommendations for Westmeath contained in that—six of them—and generally, I just wanted to if you could, give me a status on where Westmeath is in terms of implementing these recommendations.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

We're well advanced, I think, Margaret. Yeah by and large. I can't remember exactly which ones were Westmeath's.

Margaret Lane

That's okay, because I think the LGMA will be doing something very or CC'D on behalf of the CMA, writing out to ascertain where you are on all of those. And is there any one that was a particular challenge to you?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

No, we're waiting for the network of internal auditors to come back to us on the one about the independent assessment of the audit function.

Margaret Lane

And to be fair, that's the one that's coming up for all local authority advocates. And you know it's something we can look at with the LGMA maybe as well.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Yeah that's right. We have a solution to it. We have in that what we expect to happen is that local government sorry the internal auditor in other counties will come over, and maybe look at our function, and do a report on it independently.

That's our solution—that we cooperate on that basis, in the same way as we do at the moment on health and safety. So we just need to get that in place and get it up and running.

Margaret Lane

Have you any timeline?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

I haven't, because I'm a little bit out of touch with what's happening now at the corporate committee with the network. But I do ask my internal auditor, and I meet him every month, and I ask him where it's at. And he tells me that they're working on a procedure that will apply when they go and do a review in another county. So work is being done on it, is my understanding, but it hasn't commenced yet. Yeah, so that's the one. Now, the others are all moving on. We do an annual report, an annual audit report—we did one there for 2020, we presented one to the audit committee earlier this year, the annual report for 2024—and that covers a lot of the recommendations in that review that you carried out. And then our internal auditor is working with colleagues to achieve chartered status of the Institute of Internal Auditors. And the rest of them, we're happy enough that we're...covered on but I'd like to see that one of the independent review of the audit function.

Margaret

That's the most critical one to be honest with you because that gives a level of assurance you know that you're all going to rely when you're signing sequence of internal control now that's key to that.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Yeah, exactly. So we'll, we'll push for that to happen as quickly as we can, yeah.

Margaret Lane

Okay. Okay and just — I saw in your opening address, you spoke about the escalating cost of capital projects and the challenges that presents. Is I've read something recently about a lot of contractors now not participating in public contracts because of the level of risk they're expected to take on as part of that. What's your experience in that regard with such large projects? I'm not talking about maybe smaller ones now, but the large projects that you're involved in. Like, I know you'd one last year — €10 million — that's the kind of area. Now, I'm curious what your experience there is?

Ms. Jackie Finney

Certainly, we are certainly we've seen an increase in price, and it's important that we do cost estimates right up to the point that we're going to tender as well, so that we are aware of what the actual realistic cost can be. So far, we've, I haven't noticed a lack of engagement in some of our projects, and particularly if we do the expressions of interest first and then go out for the second phase — the two-part tendering process — you get good engagement. So we've been fortunate in that regard, that we are still getting the interest. But definitely, looking at prices coming in, ensuring the balance between cost and quality is more and more important, and really looking at the tender prices as they come in.

And we're finding that having more robust, more careful tender documents is really helping in the process, and knowing that we're getting value for money at the end at the end of it when we're getting our prices in.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

The risk for us here, Margaret, as I see it, is with the projects that we're funding ourselves from our own resources. We've delivered, obviously, major road projects and so on over many years, but we have TII behind us, and those or the Department of

Transport, NTA, whoever it may be. But if we're doing something like we're doing at the moment in Kinnegad — building a new library and education centre — we have a grant from a government department, but the grant is the grant. And if that project, say, goes significantly over budget, if there are claims for things that weren't foreseen or whatever, that's a cost that we have to carry. And that's where the risks are increasing, because as the projects increase in cost, the risk of overruns and percentages increase as well.

Margaret Lane

And what's your experience contractor claims? Are they escalating as well?

Ms. Jackie Finney

They are, certainly, yes. We are seeing yeah careful management of contractor of contractor claims is required, and having our own independent project board so that, if it gets to a stage that the, that there isn't agreement in a claim, that we meet as a board and we can review it as well. But and then, I suppose, back to the point of innovative recruitment — one of the areas we're looking at in our capital sections is having maybe our own Q's on the team, because I think more and more that's becoming critical. That we know our costs beforehand, and before we go to tender, and we're not getting the surprise. And that we can adequately resource and price projects, and know our match funding — as Barry said, our own internal.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

See, it's really important. That Q's thing is really important. That when we're going into a project, that we're going in with our eyes open, and that the costs and the valuations we have are realistic. And that we provide an appropriate contingency then as well, so that we're not caught at the end of it with a debt that we weren't foreseeing. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kathleen Holohan

Okay, yes. But just then, in terms of public liability — in 2024 you had a cost of settled claims per capita of €14.29. euro That's M3. National average was €13.74. Your figure in 2023 was €9.76 euro. So, I'm just wondering, was there a particular reason, and is there anything you've had to do to address that?

Mr. Michael Hand

Yeah, well, not that I'm aware of now, Kathleen. They didn't, when I presented to the audit committee — because I'm responsible for insurance administration also — nothing highlighted to me as to why it jumped. But I can have a look at that.

Kathleen Holohan

Okay I might just ask — go back, and just to the broader housing. If I understand it correctly, the Minister has asked you to increase your zoned land from 548 units to 983. I'm just wondering where you're at with that, and will you achieve the timeline? I think the Minister had intended it all be done by the end of the year, and the Taoiseach

seems a little impatient about it as well. So I suppose, is there particular challenges associated with it? And do you think you'll achieve it?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Yeah, I think we will, yeah. We won't have a difficulty there. Our current county development plan provided for 983 units per annum — that's when we adopted it in 2021. That number of units haven't been delivered since 2021, and the plan expires in '27. So we

have more than 983 units per annum zoned and available for development between now and the end of the development plan, plus the 50% headroom. In terms of general planning in the county, we're currently at the chief executive's report stage on our Mullingar town plan — So Jean is managing that process — and we'll complete that plan by Q1 of next year. So that plan is zones for Mullingar on a 10-year horizon, so its well in excess of the Minister's requirement.

We're in the pre-draft stage for the Athlone town development plan — that will be with the members in January — and again, that'll be done on a 10-year horizon and it'll provide for more than the Minister's requirement. So in our two big growth centres, which are Mullingar and Athlone, we're at an advanced stage in both plans. In terms of the remainder of the county, there is significant land zoned across all of the serviced towns and villages. We're carrying out an assessment at the moment as to what is actually available now, taking account of what's permitted and built since the plan was adopted, and we'll bring that report to the members at probably the October meeting. And if we need to carry out a variation then to achieve, say, the Minister's figure plus for the rural areas — because we can't forget the rural areas in our county — then we will do that. But it's very much under control, I would say.

Kathleen Holohan

Any infrastructure challenges in the county at all that might impact it?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

We have, we don't, in Mullingar and Athlone. We have ample wastewater capacity. Uisce Éireann are just finishing a €100 million contract in Athlone to put in additional pumping and interceptor sewers and so on, so that was a very welcome investment in Athlone. That work has already been done in Mullingar. And the only issue we have, really, is a kind of a long-term issue with the water supply in Mullingar. It is intended that it will be served by a link from the new Athlone to — sorry, Shannon to Dublin scheme. We need that as early as possible, because our current water supply is from Lough Owel, which is a special area of conservation. The, it hasn't replenished fully over the last few winters because of the weather changes that we're experiencing. So there's a long-term trend there that that water supply will be under threat, so to speak. So the sooner we get water from that scheme between Dublin and the Shannon, the better. So that will come in time. And I think it will be there in time for us. Otherwise we have various towns and villages around the county with deficits in terms of wastewater treatment in particular, but nothing really significant.

Kathleen Holohan

Okay, thanks. Back to the chair.

Miriam McDonald

Okay, thank you very much. We're nearly at the end of all the questions. I just have, you've covered a huge amount, all of you, and thank you very much. Just and my background is marketing, so I really liked your point around the fact that customer service is about a culture. You know, its not,

it shouldn't be just one individual Department — it should be about the total culture. But I'm just wondering, in terms of your corporate plan, you mentioned a customer service action plan. Do you have that developed?

And also, linking back to PI's you know and "what gets measured, gets done," and I know you mentioned the charter — but do you have any measures on responsiveness, or you know how you perform relative to the public?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

We have data coming out of our customer contact management system.

Miriam McDonald

That's the one you're going to replace?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Which is the one that we need to replace.

Miriam McDonald

Yeah.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

And we do manage the customer contacts through that, and we can see what's outstanding for a period of time and how quickly things were dealt with. But we need something more wider ranging, because not everything goes into the customer contact management system. And that's something that we need to address as part of our new system, to ensure that everything gets measured, not just what goes into the customer contact management system.

So that's something we're working on. We haven't developed a full customer service action plan yet, but it is something that we do wish to do. Again, it falls under the corporate area that we're increasing the resourcing in for that reason, and I suppose it's part of the overall response.

Yeah, yeah and we're that's something else that we're doing, actually. Thanks for the reminder, Deirdre. In our strategic workforce plan, we've identified the need for a communications officer, which we don't have at the moment.

It'd be a part-time position, but it is certainly an area that we need to resource. We need to have somebody with the necessary skills to go beyond press releases to get into more active promotion.

Miriam McDonald

Particularly the whole social media?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Of our activities and what we're doing, rather than just being reactive and maybe doing the odd photo and a press release when we sign a contract or something.

Miriam McDonald

Yeah, I mean, having said that, I do agree, you know again, from a marketing perspective, you know we always talk about the importance of physical evidence, so you know your point about the public realm, I think, is very valid as well. You know it's all about perception. You know sometimes customer perceptions aren't about truth you know

It's about how they perceive you, and as you say, the public realm being well-maintained also kind of creates a community as well. Yeah, yeah.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

It does, it does.

Miriam McDonald

And I know you spoke during today about the good relationships that you have with the elected members, and I know there's some research going to come out shortly just around some elected members in different areas feeling they don't have enough information to kind of justify to the public things like the local property tax and so on.

Do you, I mean It seems from what you've said that you have good lines of communications with your elected members. Do you think there's more that could be done in that area or I suppose there's always more, but you know is anything like that an issue, you know where the members are struggling?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

I don't think so. I think we benefit from the fact that we're a smallish county, and I do look at some of my neighbours with 40 elected members, which is a much bigger number and probably more difficult to have the kind of relationship that we have with our members in a county like that. But we benefit as well from having two towns and two municipal districts, and say Deirdre's the director for Mullingar and Jackie's the director for Athlone, so really at that level you know where you've got nine members in Athlone, eleven in Mullingar, there's scope for very strong relationships between the director and the elected members, and really that's where that's the foundation for good relations between members and the executive with the district engineer, the district manager, the district directors, and then having a line into all the other functions as well.

So really I think to give credit to the people at district level, that's where the relationships are built up in my view. If you can maintain good relations there, and then I have my work to do obviously with the elected members at plenary level, and I do that, and then I think everything will generally run fairly smoothly. And we have

principles as well that we apply in terms of dealing with the members, in terms of openness and you know communications, and letting them know in advance if something is coming, and listening to them and hearing them.

So all that helps, yeah and we're very conscious of them, and of keeping them in the picture and in the frame, that they're that they're never caught out by something, yeah, yeah.

Miriam McDonald

And just in terms of Irish water, has all, has the staffing issue been resolved in Westmeath in terms of Irish water? Are there still people making decisions?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

There are still people making decisions, but relative to waters again, we're in a good position. We have, how many have we left now? We've 12 left now, and of those 12, some of them are engineers and admin people, which are very easy to redeploy within our own services.

I think, guess, maybe we might have four or five of the caretaking staff that will come back to us, but that will probably be the extent of it. But we don't know, we won't know until the end of 2026. But from our perspective, it's a very manageable issue at this point. There are issues to be resolved, but we're working through those at national level, but from a staffing perspective, we'll be fine.

Miriam McDonald

Yeah, okay. And one and so that's all the questions, except for one final question, which is kind of the catch-all question. Are there any issues, maybe that we haven't discussed today, or didn't come up today, or we didn't ask about today, that we should be aware of in our role as the oversight body for local government?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Nothing springs to mind I have to say Miriam, Yeah, yeah Anyone else? No?

No, no, I think it's been a comprehensive discussion on the various issues, and all of the issues that I thought might come up have, so I'm satisfied. I think, in fairness, the indicators are very wide-ranging, and they do give a good impression of the local authority. So you've picked out the ones that we've been performing well on, and the ones we have work to do on.

Actually, planning enforcement is one of those that Jean is engaged in, where we have a lot of catching up to do on that, but we're engaged with it. So that's one of the issues maybe we didn't discuss, that is a challenge for us.

Miriam McDonald

Okay, and is it because of staffing again?

Mr. Barry Kehoe

It is really, because there, it's very difficult to keep enough planners in the system.

Miriam McDonald

We've heard that from a number of local authorities.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

And the problem is that enforcement tends to be at the back of the list when it comes to priorities. You know, we have to deal with the applications, we have to make sure we do our policy piece and our plans, and then deal with enforcement. So what we're trying to do is get people uttered on planners involved in enforcement activities, like inspections and reports, technicians, and that works better, because it's, you know we planners are really difficult to get in the current environment.

Miriam McDonald

Yeah, yeah, and at least you can keep them focused on the pieces where they're really needed.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Exactly, yeah. Yeah, so that's an issue that we just didn't discuss. But otherwise no, thank you.

Miriam McDonald

Okay, well, thank you very sincerely, all of you, for your time today, yourself, Barry, and all your team. And I know you've been under the spotlights for an hour and three quarters, so thank you very much for your time. And obviously, I know you don't come to these meetings with no preparation, so thank you also for all the preparation that you and your teams will have done in advance of the meeting. And of course, for coming up here today to meet us. Thank you.

Mr. Barry Kehoe

Thank you. Any time. Thank you very much.

End Of Meeting.