NOAC/Sligo County Council Transcript

Michael McCarthy: Okay, we will begin the meeting. Our colleagues from Sligo, you are very welcome to the scrutiny meeting with NOAC. What we normally do is we begin with introductions, then I'll say a few words, then I'll ask Martin to do the opening statement. So, I'm going to start with my own introduction, and then we work our way around the room to my right. So Michael McCarthy, Chairman of NOAC.

Alan Mc Dermott: Alan Mc Dermott, Member of the NOAC Secretariat.

John Goldrick: John Goldrick, NOAC Secretariat.

Brían Flynn: Brían Flynn, Director of Services, with responsibility for housing operations, arts, library, economic development, tourism, and community integration.

Emer Concannon: Emer Concannon**,** Director of Services for Placemaking, which involves planning capital projects, predominantly.

Martin Lydon: Martin Lydon, Chief Executive of Sligo County Council, I've been in the post for approximately five years.

Marie Whelan: Marie Whelan, Sligo County Council, Director of Finance and Corporate Governance. I have been in finance, or director of finance for almost 20 years, and in the last two years I've taken over responsibility for corporate services and human resources. So, I'm sure I'll be getting lots of questions. Thank you.

Jim Molloy: Jim Molloy, Director of Services for climate, environment, roads, and emergency services and the Sligo-Drumcliff Municipal District.

Miriam McDonald: Miriam McDonald, Board Member, NOAC.

Declan Breathnach: Declan Breathnach, Board Member.

Anne Haugh: Anne Haugh, Board Member.

Noel Harrington: Noel Harrington, Board Member.

John Byrne: John Byrne, Board Member.

Kathleen Holohan: Kathleen Holohan, Board Member.

Michael McCarthy: Super, thank you, everybody. So, you're very welcome to this instalment of the scrutiny meeting with Sligo. We've had interaction, obviously, with Sligo in the past. We had interaction with your predecessor in the past when we went down for the scrutiny visit there. As you can see, we've an enhanced level of scrutiny meetings; we now have them recorded, and we make this available on the NOAC website once that's been agreed and signed off on. We've just published a performance indicator report. We went national with that, with national media outlets, but also local media outlets. There was a huge response to it from the media outlets, and I think what it demonstrates is the relevance of local authorities in people's lives. There was a huge, I think, rich tapestry of information available to us so that we could present that information in an objective fashion.

Now, from our perspective, we put a lot of investment in terms of the annual good practice seminar, where we showcase good practice from local authorities. And there won't always be good practice to showcase, and we can't showcase all of the good practice, but what we hope to achieve by that is that we would, you know, provide, I suppose, a benchmark to other local authorities to improve an area of delivery or become more innovative based on that kind of good practice.

So, we use the DTA in our own reports to kind of, I suppose, inform that particular event. And I think it's grown in stature every year in recent years, and I think there's a greater kind of scrutiny now of local authorities, particularly since we've enhanced and, I suppose, brought NOAC to the level that it is now at. It is effectively, I suppose, to the local authority family, a type of PAC level of, I suppose, interrogation of information and collation of information. I want to pay tribute to the data coordinators on Sligo for providing the information to us. We know it's an arduous task; there's a lot to be done. Ordinarily, and mindful we've added a layer of ask on that. So, without further ado, I'm going to call on Martin to do his opening statement.

Martin Lydon: Alright. Thanks, Chair. Good morning, Chair and members of NOAC. I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. We very much welcome the opportunity to engage with NOAC, and to provide an overview of County Sligo and the work of the County Council. As the Chair said, the last engagement with NOAC was in June 2021. And I think it's fair to say a considerable amount has changed in that intervening period, both within Sligo and across the local government sector.

Our work is guided by our corporate plan 2024 to 2029, which sets out a vision for a flourishing, sustainable, and inclusive Sligo. Our mission is to build vibrant and inclusive communities, support a robust local economy, honour our heritage and protect our environment. Those ambitions underpin the work we undertake across the organisation and importantly reflect the priorities and aspirations of the people of County Sligo and our elected members.

Sligo is a county with considerable strengths. We have a strong natural and cultural heritage, a growing population, a vibrant town centre and a significant education and research presence, a strong tourism offering, and play an important role as a regional growth centre for the northwest. We are ambitious about Sligo's future and our role as a place to live, work, invest and visit.

A central part of delivering that ambition is the relationship between the executive and our elected members. We have recognised the important democratic role played by our councillors and believe that the best outcomes are achieved when the executive and elected members work constructively together with a shared focus on long-term interests of the county and its communities.

We have also continued to invest in transforming how we deliver services. Digital transformation is an important part of this. We are progressing a new CRM system, an environmental case management system and online grant processes. These initiatives are intended not simply to digitise existing processes but to improve customer services, make services more accessible and efficient and provide better information to support decision-making.

From a financial perspective, we continue to operate in a challenging environment. The decision on 5th of October by elected members to increase

the local property tax adjustment factor to 25% is an important element of maintaining our financial capacity. Alongside this, we have a significant programme of capital investment, with approximately €509 million, with €300 million relating to housing being invested over the next three years. That investment is critical to maintaining and developing the infrastructure required to support Sligo's continued growth.

Economic development remains a particular priority. Projects such as the AIM Centre, a collaboration between ourselves, Leitrim County Council and the Atlantic Technological University, of which Council is the largest shareholder, demonstrate the type of innovation and enterprise infrastructure that we want to foster in Sligo, introducing AI to the SME sector, not only in the Northwest, but throughout the country.

There have also been significant achievements across the organisation. We are proud of our progress, and this is reflected in the reduction in the financial deficit, one of the best-performing authorities in relation to low vacancy rates and void turnaround times, on track to deliver 124 social housing units in 2026, with another 160 in the pipeline. A blossoming private sector housing market with 600 units on site, with another circa 500 units with planning permission. Our improved tourist performance with growing reputation, enhanced by the visit of the Galeón Andalucia, which attracted 30,000 visitors over 10 days.

Our work with communities leading to Sligo being awarded Ireland's tidiest town by IBAL. Riverstown Village winning a gold medal at the Entente Florale Ceremony, and our preliminary assessment request to UNESCO regarding the Passage Tomb Landscape so we can apply for UNESCO World Heritage status.

At the same time, we are very conscious of the challenges facing local government. The current operating environment is increasingly demanding. The introduction and operation of measures such as the residential zone land tax presents significant additional work and financial implications. We also require clarity around the future treatment of Uisce Éireann stranded costs.

Recruitment and retention remain difficult in a competitive labour market, making it imperative that the Council has the resources and capacity to deliver the responsibilities placed upon it. We therefore welcome the broader consideration given to the future role, functions, financing and governance of local government through the Local Government Taskforce. The key issue for

us is that increased responsibilities must be matched by the appropriate resources and capacity. Recent Council discussions have highlighted the continuing pressure created by the increasing resilience on specific funding and the resulting impact on local flexibility.

Ultimately, our objective is straightforward. Working with our partners and stakeholders, we aim to deliver high-quality services, support our communities, strengthen our economy and make Sligo an even better place to live, work, invest, and visit. We recognise that effective local government requires accountability, continuous improvement and a willingness to examine how we do things. We welcome the opportunity to share our experiences with NOAC today. Thank you, Chair.

Michael McCarthy: Thank you very much, Martin; thank you for that. So we begin with the questioning, and I'll start with Working Group Four.

Kathleen Holohan: Good morning. I noticed from your audit report that you have, if I'm correct, 16 companies that the council has interest in. So I suppose, what structures and systems have you in place to ensure that there's proper governance measures in relation to those companies and that they're not, we'll say, going to prove to be a problem for the local authority, either financially or any other way? And you might specifically notice, one company there is Sligo Tourism Company, there's no accounts recorded: what's the status of that company?

Martin Lydon: I'll start with the Sligo Tourism Company; I think that's the easiest bit, and then I'll let my colleague Marie go into the detail around the various companies. The Sligo Tourism Company, we worked with the board to dissolve that company actually in 2022. And it took a while just for the accounts and the legal operations to work their way through. Working with the board, we took a decision within the council that we wanted to bring the tourism product in under our own auspices and not be run by a separate company.

That decision was taken because we actually believed we were sitting on a county that was underdeveloped in relation to tourism, and it was important that we actually brought some sort of targeted performance to the tourism product, i.e. I've already mentioned the 30,000 visitors that came. So what really effectively happened, we were probably funding that company to the tune of between €100,000 - €150,000 per annum. We're now investing

€600,000 per annum in our tourism, and by bringing that internally, and that's by putting our own staff in place, but also then looking to develop festivals and events as well throughout the county. But then on the governance perspective, I'll let Marie take that.

Marie Whelan: Thank you. Yes, I suppose the biggest connection we have is with the sports centres and the arts centres and Sligo Airport, which is based in Strandhill. And we engaged Governance Ireland in 2022 to do a review of the whole governance structure of those companies which involved meeting with boards, meeting with managers or chief operators and making recommendations, assessing their finances, assessing their governance structure, their introduction packs, their training, their planning, all the governance aspects of our associated companies because we fund Sligo Sports Centre, Waterpoint, the Model Gallery and the Hawk's Well Theatre. And some of the other companies on that Appendix 1 aren't directly funded, but we have membership on the board.

We also have membership on all boards from the elected members, which, following that review, we reduced some of the numbers of elected members. And we'd have an official which would be nominated through the management team here, out to the board and it would be normally at a senior level. And like that, the nominee would discuss with various directors any issues that are coming up or concerns or whatever, and myself, I suppose I've been on a few of them boards. I'm currently on Sligo Airport, so I have a lot of knowledge of the operations and the funding and you know if somebody here wanted advice, I'd be there as the governance advisor on that.

Kathleen Holohan: Okay. So I'm just going to move on then to the Public Spending Code and I suppose, what particular challenges do you think are posed to you in procurements that are greater than €10 million? Is there anything, or have you any systems in place to ensure that they're managed appropriately?

Marie Whelan: Well, I suppose we had a few big projects that have come through there on our most recent Public Spending Codes on the N4, and some capital housing projects, and all of them, there's a full procurement cost-benefit analysis, a straightforward process. And there's lots more projects underway at the minute, and if some of the others want to come in on it, but those

procurements are adhered to all the rules around that. So the big stuff is straightforward; sometimes the smaller stuff can be more difficult.

Kathleen Holohan: And do you find the process of doing the Public Spending Code useful?

Marie Whelan: Yes, but it's the awareness of what purpose it serves for the people on the ground that we're asking for the material. You know, it's the buy-in, it's the fear of it, sometimes, and what is the outcome of it. But I suppose on big, big capital projects, the knowledge, the expertise is involved from the word go on most of those, and in advance of them, there's a lot of pre-assessment and approvals for the money.

Kathleen Holohan: I notice as well from the 2024 audit that you have, I think it's €4.72 million of unfunded capital balances, and I suppose have you any plans in terms of how you're going to address those in the coming years?

Marie Whelan: Well, I'll give some of the answer, maybe, and Martin, come in. They're very specific. They're all actual valuable assets. They're land, they're property, and I suppose they're, in one case, it's a potential development; it's a car parking space, and the big cost was in title and a lot of years' work in it, and it was part of a project. And the others are realisable. They're not unfunded variables in projects along the way. These are very specific pieces. They're assets. They'd be realisable in the morning, and they'd be funded if we needed to.

Martin Lydon: Just to come in on that, if I may, Chair. Just on those assets. We are a regional growth centre and I think it's incumbent on us when assets become available that we think are going to be in the long-term benefits for the people of Sligo that we do intervene and buy those assets. And that's what's happened in a couple of those instances with unfunded balances. And as a result, we're quite lucky that if we do have to move forward with further social housing developments, we feel we've already got enough land. But if we do need to move forward, we're in a position now that we've got the land banks in our pockets already. So we're not going to be going to the market and being held to ransom in relation to that.

Can I just also just say on the procurement of the capital projects, our financial situation, which was well publicised a number of years ago, but it's in a lot

better shape than it was. We're very clear that we ensure that all our funding partners are going to honour their funding arrangements before we enter into the big social housing contracts or be it with roads in relation to with the Department of Transport. So that's very clear and that's shown clearly in any sort of see orders or anything that comes before me. So we do have them those sort of systems and checks in place as well.

Kathleen Holohan: Just in relation to the auditor report again, the auditor has commented a couple of times in relation to creditors and references a process where you, as he says, “park payments”. I'm just
wondering if you could explain a little bit more about that to us.

Marie Whelan: Yeah, that's in relation to year-end cut-offs, and it's mostly in relation to the Roads Programme. And on the 2025 audit, we've reduced that value. It's claiming down. It can run into getting the jobs done at the last few weeks of the end of the year and claiming down the balance of a grant rather than losing it.

Kathleen Holohan: And do those funding agencies understand that that's what you're doing?

Marie Whelan: Well, it's not of major money; the work will be carried out within a few weeks normally, and it could actually be carried out by December/January.

Kathleen Holohan: And so you don't consider there's any risk there that a funding agency might refuse to recoup the money to you or look for it back?

Martin Lydon: I suppose, just on that, I suppose first of all we're in contractual obligations to companies to pay them, so that's what we do. And as you say, Kathleen, this comes up in the audit report regularly. And I suppose it's the one thing that I usually go into the audit committee around. And I suppose we're very clear that, one, we don't want to be returning money, because we think that would be politically unacceptable in the council chamber.

But number two, we've also been very clear that we think that in certain instances funding agencies should be letting us know where our grants are earlier in the year, so we're not running into that situation come November, where we're having to park those payments. And also it can be, because we're

dealing with taxpayers' money, we don't believe the quality of work that's being produced is to the required standards, so we retain the money back until the contractor fulfils their contractual obligations.

Kathleen Holohan: So, you park the expenditure, but you claim the grant?

Martin Lydon: Yes.

Kathleen Holohan: And that has never been an issue with any of your funders?

Martin Lydon: Not as yet.

Marie Whelan: And it wouldn't be across a broad spectrum of funders. On most, claiming money it's retrospective. The payments have to be made. It is in relation to close off of end of year on roads.

Kathleen Holohan: Yeah, it's just I'm aware of another local authority a few years ago who had to pay back money because they had claimed it in advance of the current expenditure. Now it was a significantly higher figure than we're talking about here.

Marie Whelan: This is rolling grant aid; it's not a project that's uncompleted, do you know?

Martin Lydon: Yeah.

Kathleen Holohan: Just in terms then of internal audit, what's the status of the implementation of the various recommendations in the audit report review undertaken by NOAC? Several of them relate to Sligo. So, what progress have you made in relation to that?

Marie Whelan: Yeah, I suppose a lot is around training and adhering to standards and the qualifications of the auditor. We have a small audit team of one person. So, we're heavily reliant on one person. And in 2026, because of staff shortage, we also tried to recruit, and we couldn't recruit, so we have gone through the OGP framework for audit companies. And we are selecting a company to carry out the review of our internal audit function, which is one of the recommendations, and carry out a hybrid version about internal audit with

their own resources. They come with a lot of skills and expertise that we've never had, you know.

We've had an evolving internal audit function and our auditor is part of the network and all of that. But I suppose, in a small local authority, one person is on their own, really. So, I think this will be very beneficial. It will do a review, and it will do audits for us, and it will make recommendations on the standards, tying in with those standards.

Kathleen Holohan: In the auditor's report, you said that you carried out three audits in a year.

Marie Whelan: The audit committee meetings.

Kathleen Holohan: No, no, it references the number of audit reports you carry out. How many audit reports do you do every year?

Marie Whelan: Well, it can vary on the size of them, but I think that... I think there was a thing about committee meetings that year as well that we didn't care for. We do the main Public Spending Code, we do end of the year motor tax, we do the SICAP audit, and then we do probably four to five other localised audits.

Kathleen Holohan: And is there any specific ones that you're doing this year?

Marie Whelan: Well, we're looking at assets and asset register, because it's an item that comes up in the internal or in the audit report as well on reconciling and title and all those long-standing issues. That's just one of them and cash around motor tax as well.

Kathleen Holohan: Okay, Declan has a question as well for you. Thank you very much.

Declan Breathnach: I have a specific question on overtime. Sorry, Marie, you're in the firing line all the time. In the 2023 Audit Report, it identified weaknesses in terms of how overtime was managed and recorded. What have you done to make that situation better or to improve?

Marie Whelan: I issued instruction that if it wasn't signed off, I think that was one of the weaknesses that was identified: that timesheets may not always be signed off, that they wouldn't get paid. A lot of discussions have happened in the section that has the volume of overtime, which would be in the infrastructure, and a review of the whole demand, what's the driving force, and I suppose the ultimate aim is to restructure around that to build in an employment role rather than overtime and, you know, excessive hours as well.

Declan Breathnach: And you're satisfied with that those improvements, making inroads into that?

Marie Whelan: Yeah, a lot of work has gone into it; the steps are improving, but we have bigger changes to implement.

Miriam McDonald: And how many people are in the finance department?

Marie Whelan: Oh, between motor tax and everything, there's about 40 people.

Michael McCarthy: Super. Anne?

Anne Haugh: Yeah. My area is the performance indicators, which I'll be going into later, but just one of those relates to the finance and collection rates. So I'll just deal with it under this section. So, Martin mentioned it earlier on your historic situation financially. So, I suppose, in terms of the indicators this year, it's showing up again as the largest revenue account deficit at over €8 million. But acknowledging that has reduced significantly from €16.5 million back in 2021. So, acknowledging that Sligo are making good progress, I suppose, on decreasing that deficit.

The other area then, obviously, is the collection rates. The commercial collection rate is around 78% in 2025, which is the lowest in the country, and the housing loan collection rate is the third lowest. And rent collection has been increasing steadily over the last number of years, but it's still below the national average at around 86%.

So, I suppose, acknowledging that there have been historic financial issues and the deficit in the past, the collections did seem to be a challenge for the county, and in terms of questions, really, we'd be interested to know what work is being carried out that might help in reducing the deficit and continue to reduce the

deficit. And then what, if anything, is being done to address the collection rates that are significantly lower than the average? You mentioned, I think it's in the audit report, and it may well have been in the indicators response as well, about the commercial rates incentive scheme and the contribution of that or the impact of that, to the collection rates. So I suppose maybe just to explain what impact that is having on your collection rates and what sort of expectations you have going forward in terms of reducing the deficit and if that incentive scheme to continues to impact.

Marie Whelan: Good, thank you. I suppose that reducing the deficit is an ongoing budgetary control measure that we operate on an annual basis.
I feel, and I've been at it a long time, and in my starting point around any budget is payroll and headcount, and it's managing that, and we've managed that very tightly over the last number of years. And it was the significant driver at a point in time back in the difficult years, was to get that under control, and we have it. And we have a very, well, I feel we submitted a very satisfactory workforce plan last year, and we'll operate within that. So, then our running costs and all around that we manage very tightly as well. So every year, it's our plan to come in to chip away with that deficit.

On the collection rates, in 2022, you know, the writing off of the uncollectables on the vacant properties, we would have always given the 100% write off on that. So, we brought in the scheme in 2022 for the collection of the vacant, and we have a tiered process of the percentage that the vacant properties have to pay. So, that has built up the arrears and the rates, and if we did the write-offs, we'd have a higher collection, but we're carrying write-offs now on some of them for '22, '23, '24, and '25, so that's impacting. But we're making headway at the same time.

We have a fully resourced team in rates, more IT capacity, making headway identifying; it's a very slow, tedious process, identifying ownership, getting money on vacant properties. And so, we are making headway. Yeah, hopefully we will get that percentage up. And we introduced income task force meetings as well, where Martin, as CE, meets bimonthly with teams on all the income collection rates, and we have our target for the year. And, you know, like on a basis, we are collecting a lot of money; our accrual for rates in 2025 was 15.8 million; we collected 14.2 and a lot of vacancies.

So, we are collecting a lot of money in a year, it's the balances coming forward that we are working on. And likewise for rents and loans, we are collecting. In the rents, we collected 6.7 or the accrued was 6.8 in 2025, and we collected 6.849. And the same on loans, we had 999, less than a million, and we collected over a million. So, we are collecting money in the year. It's dealing with arrears and difficult cases. We've put lots of work into housing loans. We've done the conversions. The… I can't think of the…

Martin Lydon: Shared ownership?

Marie Whelan: No, but the… Taking it back to the stock…

Martin Lydon: Mortgage to rent.

Marie Whelan: Mortgage to rent. You know, so we've worked closely with housing and processed it that way. So, like, we don't have a huge loan book, so we're watching it tightly.

So then on the rates incentive scheme, yeah, that brings in the money early, and we can see that in the bank account. But I suppose, again, it has helped with the actual collections for the year, and we're working through the various schemes under the new legislation as well for 2027 on the rates vacancy scheme or the rates waiver. There was something else in my head now. Anyhow – Oh, we're going online with a digital process with that
for businesses to submit details. It's one of our digital projects.

Anne Haugh: And you mentioned, Martin, has the task force or or task meetings for income.

Martin Lydon: Income task force, yeah, yeah.

Anne Haugh: Yeah, do you have your debt collection centralised, or is it all done, like is housing loans done in housing and rents done then…

Marie Whelan: Rents is in housing, but the others are in finance, loans and rates.

We'd work closely with housing on the rents, because we had it up to a point in time, and there's been a rent review recommended last week at the meeting as

well for implementation on the 1st of February 2027, so that will impact on our position for 2027, because it'll become inflated until it gets sorted with income details and all that.

Martin Lydon: Can I just come in there, Chair, if that's okay?

I suppose, look, just on the deficit itself. The council, the height of the deficit was actually 26 million, and in about 2016/2017. So, I mean, the team did a lot of work, before I got there, the deficit was under control. It was also part of a financial plan at that time through the department, so it was being, Sligo was being monitored a lot more closely than any other local authority, and I think some of that discipline has stayed there.

On the collection rates, the vacancy piece is starting to bear a bit of fruition now because as people go to sell properties now they're realising they have to pay the vacancy element, so it's actually starting to work there.

On the loans, the problem we have with the loans is we have a number of historical shared ownership, and we have a small loan book, so those shared ownership have a very impact, big impact on the collection rate that happens there.

And then lastly on the rents, I suppose really, and those of us who've worked in the sector a while, we're really dealing with cases where there's mental health issues, addiction issues, really they're the cases that are driving our arrears in relation to that. And it requires careful consideration, because we have brought in an external solicitor now to tackle debt, but behind every debt there is a story, so that needs to be considered as well.

Anne Haugh: Yeah, that was actually going to be my question. It seems like the current situation is controlled, and it's tackling historic debt that's there, historic arrears. So there is some plan of action there; you said you brought in an external…

Martin Lydon: Yeah, absolutely.

Anne Haugh: To chase individual cases, is it?

Martin Lydon: Yeah, look, we're moving through with a number of cases. I think a number of the loans will either move in, they'll convert to normal equity loans from the shared ownership or move into the mortgage-to-rent space. But like you say, because we've got such a small loan book, five or six of those cases have a massive impact on the collection rate. So it distorts it, really, because we don't have a big loan book. So that has the impact.

Anne Haugh: Thank you.

Michael McCarthy: Thank you, Anne. John.

John Byrne: Thank you, Chair. Just for me, to talk about your corporate risk register and what risks are currently ranked highest in terms of impact and likelihood and what mitigating actions are in place?

Martin Lydon: I'll start, and then you're under pressure then again, Marie.

Marie Whelan: I knew coming in here.

Martin Lydon: Look, I suppose one of the elements for us is obviously, as I mentioned there, is the recruitment and retention element of staffing. For example, we've recruited 37 people this year, and then we've lost 36. So, we're running into a bit of a standstill, really, in relation to recruitment and retention. But I don't think, that's not unique to us. And if anything, we're probably in a better position than some of our colleagues there.

One of the big elements has been the inflationary increases, as well. We've been talking about that; the risk register is on our agenda for our management team every two weeks. So obviously that's come up high up the agenda because not a lot of the funding agencies have decided to fund the inflation side of things, especially on the annual budgetary stuff, in and around roads. So we've had to work with elected members when we've looked at the road scheme, for example, and cut our cloth accordingly and just deliver the roads that we can deliver.

And then going back to staffing, one of the big issues for us, after telling Anne about our pain and our woe in our finances, is the number of posts that are specifically funded. And you can't go out and do temporary contracts. You can't recruit people, so you're having to go out and recruit on a permanent basis. And

that leaves us with a risk. Now, we try to manage that through our workforce plan, as in you look at age profiles, and we do have a high age profile. And you hope that it's going to balance itself out and you'll be able to move those people into other roles should funding stop, but again that is a big, big risk for us as well. So, they're the sort of things really on the risk register.

John Byrne: Any specific areas, like engineers, or a broad spectrum?

Martin Lydon: It's across the board. It's your engineering posts; it's having to do Healthy Ireland, for example; it's doing your integration posts, and government policy can change very quickly, so then we have to be agile and flexible for the staff to see what do we do with these staff who we've brought in on permanent contracts. So, that's really where we're at, John.

John Byrne: As well as the additional responsibilities that the departments are throwing out to local authorities.

Martin Lydon: Yeah, but I'm sure we'll come on to it, but we do sign up to the MOUs and SLAs in relation to that. So if we're putting our names to the agreements, it's incumbent on us then to deliver. We can't renege on those things, but it's one of those areas that we do need to look at. And I suppose one of the big areas, and you mentioned engineers that suffered, and Emer might want to talk about it, we have sort of an NRDO office locally. We're down about seven or eight engineers. Now, they're fully funded through the TII, but we have to be cautious in our approach. Now, we can't get people anyway, but we would still need to be cautious in our approach. Would we want to fill all those posts if projects don't then come to fruition?

John Byrne: Yeah, okay. Just in relation to the corporate plan, the NOAC review of the implementation of the corporate plans for local authorities and regional assemblies. The report highlighted that most local authorities and assemblies had not undertaken a formal assessment of its public sector human rights duty as required by the Act. Within its 25-29 corporate plans, Sligo County Council stated that it will report on progress, developments and achievements regarding the implementation of actions to ensure that we are in full compliance with this duty within our annual reports. So, can you tell us what the main updates have been to date regarding this?

Martin Lydon: I'll let Brían take that, because I think we've got some good practice in relation to that area.

Brían Flynn: Thanks, Martin. John, in 2023, early 2024, we published our Disability Inclusion and Access Strategy. And on the back of that, we have established our Disability Consultative Committee, which combines a number of elected members, disability advocates, and representatives from the Disabled Persons Organisation in Sligo and the likes of the Irish Wheelchair Association and so on. So that committee is in place, and we're meeting four times a year.

In addition, we've taken the step- I think we're one of the first local authorities in Ireland to do this- we've appointed a full-time Access and Inclusion Officer, and so he works very, very closely with the Disability Consultative Committee.

In addition to that, we've introduced a new concept called – well, before I go there - we've established an interdepartmental team. So, within our Disability Inclusion and Action Strategy, we have 29 actions to deliver on. And most of those, or quite a lot of those, actions fall on ourselves to deliver. So we've established an interdepartmental team. I chair that team, and the Access and Inclusion officer is secretary to that team. So that brings in staff from right across the organisation to ensure that we're not operating in this siloed space. Emer's team are coming in and reporting to us in terms of how they're delivering on the actions that are contained within our strategy.

Equally, we've got representation from IT, from parks, from planning, from tourism, economic development, right across the board. And so, that committee, that interdepartmental team, also meets four times a year in advance of our Disability Consultative Committee meetings. And so then, the Access and Inclusion Officer will report to the DCC on how we're delivering out on those actions contained within our strategy.

We're casting the net a little bit wider now. In that, we have a concept that we're calling Sligo Unlimited. So, we want Sligo to become the most inclusive town and county in Ireland. And so, we're working with an external consultant to develop an implementation framework for us called Sligo Unlimited, and that looks at two strands. One is looking at our own internal systems, so engaging with Marie's staff and HR to ensure that, from a recruitment perspective, that we're meeting our obligations, and I have to say we're on an upward trend

there, in that in 2024 the National Disability Authority, I think we had 4.2% of staff identified as having a disability. In 2025, we're up at 5.3%, 5.4%. So, we're moving closer to that 6% target set by the national level.

Additionally, the second strand to Sligo Unlimited is to establish a baseline. So, working with external stakeholders like the business community, like the ATU, like Sligo LEADER Company to establish a baseline of what's happening in that space of access and inclusion, and then developing little projects and initiatives that we can move on year after year. For example, a pilot award scheme for businesses that are employing people, perhaps with disabilities. So we have a lot happening in that space, and I think we have a good story to tell them.

John Byrne: Very good, Brían, that's very encouraging. Okay. The review of the implementation of corporate plans as well, some local authorities highlighted the COVID-19 pandemic, staff resource issues and delays in funding as three factors that delayed the achievement of the number of actions in the corporate plans. So can you tell us about what actions that were not met in your corporate plan and what workarounds you might have developed to fight such issues in the future?

Martin Lydon: I suppose in relation to the corporate plan, it's done at such a high level. So look, we break it down to the annual service delivery plan. I think one of the areas where we didn't meet targets where we expected to meet targets would have been in relation to some of our staffing levels. We didn't have enough resources sometimes to be able to deliver the services to the standard that we would like to have done it. In turn, I don't think we probably would have had the finances available either to be able to deliver in relation to the corporate plan.

I think overall though, our biggest issue in relation to the corporate plan was that we probably didn't take it as serious as we should have done in the first instance. And I have to be quite honest and say that in relation to that. But we've sort of turned that round a bit now. We've put the sort of... With the way we've designed the corporate plan and our annual service delivery plans, we are putting more of an emphasis on people to deliver. And the way we do that, we don't have sort of general team meetings. We call them IPM meetings. And from that, what we do we take the sort of different targets in the annual service delivery plan, and then we ask staff why we're not meeting the targets, and it's a live meeting. And then we're saying to them, why are we not delivering on

where we should be delivering? And I think that's helped gauge where we are as an organisation, number one. But number two, bring much more focus to the delivery of services, which perhaps we probably didn't focus on as hard as we should have done previously.

Brían Flynn: Can I just come in on one example of that?

So, within our library services, John, at the start of each year, our county librarian will take all of his staff off-site for one day, and he will ask every single member of the staff to stand up in front of the room and present on what their particular role is and where it fits within the team development plan, the annual service delivery plan, and ultimately the corporate plan. And that's an idea that we're starting to roll out across the organisation.

Jim Molloy: Sorry, I might cut in as well. Sorry, just a very brief bit, but one of the other things we introduced within the IPM plan is that when there are the actions, it's the key actions, not the full list of actions that anybody's involved in, but the actions then have to relate back to the corporate plan. So, there is an element that says this is the elements of the corporate plan that these actions actually relate to. And I think that's been very useful, for particularly junior staff, in realising the role that they're playing and how it fits into the whole delivery for everybody.

John Byrne: Okay, thanks. I'll hand over to Declan; he has a couple of questions on the Local Enterprise Office.

Declan Breathnach: Yes, specifically on the Local Enterprise Offices. Martin, you referred to a particular focus on the 2024-2029 Corporate Plan. In the previous plan I think there was six strategic objectives and indeed 14 actions to be achieved through the EOCS. Unfortunately, at that time Sligo were the lowest, second lowest in the country in terms of job creation and indeed trading online vouchers and even drawdowns, yet you were clearly third highest, for example, in terms of the mentoring programme, which is to be commended. Can you comment on a previous corporate plan and the current corporate plan in relation to how you're addressing those measures?

Martin Lydon: Do you want to address the numbers?

Brían Flynn: Okay, so I'll address the numbers in so far as you'll note from '24 into '25 that there was a significant reduction in jobs created. During that period, 16 of our startups, high potential startups, transferred from our local enterprise office into Enterprise Ireland.

For example, one local company, when it transferred, had 12 full-time employees and I think something like 20 other employees. A year later, it has 25 full-time employees and 25 other. So, unfortunately, Enterprise Ireland are taking some of our low-hanging fruit.

On the mentoring, we're doing really well there. We have a panel of 76 mentors, and I think we've already achieved, or we're very, very close to achieving our 2026 targets in terms of mentoring. I think our target might be around 234, and we're at 97% of that. So the office is performing well, but unfortunately there is that task of these high potentials are being pulled in by Enterprise Ireland.

On the other hand, SMEs are telling us that it's an extremely challenging environment out there. Martin talked about the challenges that we're having in terms of recruitment. Equally, the SMEs are having challenges with recruitment. We're offering salary support, but unfortunately they can't get the employees or the recruits to take up those supports because, I suppose for the most part, they're tending to move towards the more established companies, perhaps where there's less risk, rather than going in with an SME.

Declan Breathnach: Yeah, thanks for that. Are you suggesting that there would be a way to in which credit would be given to the local authority for a period of time before jobs, or when jobs are moving into Enterprise Ireland? It's not the first time we have come across this situation.

Brían Flynn: It certainly would be nice if it was recognised in some form, yeah.

Declan Breathnach: You don't have a sort of solution?

Brían Flynn: No at the moment, but….

Martin Lydon: I have one, actually. I think if we could come up with a performance indicator, the number of jobs that transferred from the LEO into Enterprise Ireland, that would give the clear picture as an indicator in the year. I think that would solve that.

Brían Flynn: And just a last word, on a positive note, we're looking at upwards of 50 plus jobs in 2026.

Declan Breathnach: Thank you. We hope you'll be top of the pops with before the next report comes up, Thank you.

Michael McCarthy: Thanks, Declan. Now, we'll move on to Working Group Two. Anne.

Anne Haugh: Okay, so this is the performance indicator working group. And I'll start off on a very positive note, for a change, which is just in relation to housing, and I think it was mentioned by you, Martin, in your opening statement as well, ongoing and, you know, very impressive performance by Sligo always on the vacancy rate, in particular, you've 2,311 social houses at the end of 2025 and a vacancy rate of just 1.17%, with the national average being 2.44%, so that's only half the national average.

And then also in terms of the rehousing or re-letting of vacant properties, you record at 20.71 weeks, and again, that's significantly below the national average of 32.08 weeks. So, there's only two other local authorities, I think, that have lower re-letting times than Sligo, so very well done on that. And I think that has been a consistent performance ratio for a good number of years. And since I think 2020, you've held that record so well done on that.

I suppose really we just want to know today what your secrets are, in terms of we talk about disseminating best practice. Is there anything that other local authorities could learn from your achievements in this area in terms of both the quick turnaround times for re-letting and the low vacancy rate?

Brían Flynn: First of all, it's down to a very efficient and effective team. Are there any secrets? There's no real secrets Anne. I suppose one of the challenges or one of the things we try to do is to get our hands on the keys of that void as quickly as possible, because until we have our hands on the keys we can't get in and establish what works have to be carried out on the property. And sometimes that's not always easy; if somebody has passed away, for example, you mightn't get your hands on keys for a number of weeks.

In terms of procuring the works, where we inspect a void and if we feel that the works are below something of the order of 15,000, we simply go out and get three quotations, and we turn that work around as quickly as possible. When they're in excess of 15,000, we're using SupplyGov.

Typically, there's about 10 to 12 contractors that are pricing this work in Sligo. And when we go out on a unit-by-unit basis on SupplyGov, we're getting maybe between three and five quotations back. And so, again, we give tenderers one week to price the works, and we're trying to ensure that we're getting the best use of those 10 contractors, that there isn't one contractor that's pricing all of the work and getting all of the work and then delaying that process of getting the work done.

Anne Haugh: Do you operate a framework?

Brían Flynn: No, we operate a framework for repairs but not for void turnaround. And I suppose the big thing then is not to wait until the work is done to start the allocation process. So, while our technical team are working on the void turnaround, our allocations team are also working in the background to look at our housing list and to be ready to offer that unit the minute the contractor hands back the keys to us.

Anne Haugh: Have you a policy around specific works that you do carry out for a quick turnaround? Because I imagine if it needed a retrofit or more intensive works or replacement of windows and doors and things like that, you wouldn't be able to deliver it as quickly as you are, or have you done that? Is there a distinction, I suppose, between the very superficial works and the more…?

Brían Flynn: We don't really, in that we're getting units back that simply need to be cleaned out and maybe, you know, a lick of paint versus units that could cost up to maybe €100,000 to turn around. They require windows, doors, you know, a complete retrofit inside, and everything in between.

So, there's no secret; I suppose the average Anne, it's just bringing us in at that 20 weeks. There absolutely are some of those units that are possibly taking us 30 to 35 weeks to turn around because they need such significant works to be carried out. We are going to be moving towards a planned maintenance approach, obviously and we're hoping to survey up to 15% of our own stock this year. And that will hopefully assist us in achieving even better timelines,

but I think that the targets that have been set for us are going to be very difficult to achieve. That 15 weeks by 2027, by closeout of 2027, and 12 weeks by closeout of 2028, is going to be so difficult to achieve.

Number one, because of the limits in the number of contractors that are out there. Obviously, our housing stock is going to increase. And then there's always going to be those outliers in terms of the houses that require a huge amount of work or the houses where you may not get your hands on the keys for three weeks if it's somebody that has passed away. So there's always going to be challenges, Anne.

Anne Haugh: And just on that, you mentioned about adding new houses. You only added 23 units last year. Was there a specific reason for that? The timing of it, say. Cause I know you had way over 100, I think.

Brían Flynn: Well, Emer will probably come in on that. In terms of the units that were added were predominantly tenant in situ and Part Vs. And we have a very significant Part V programme going forward. Martin touched in his introduction there, on the number of planning permissions that are already granted or underway in Sligo. So, you know, we expect a significant increase in Part Vs, but Emer might want to comment on the numbers added.

Martin Lydon: Just to say, just to explain, we've split our housing operations from housing capital, so that's why Emer's responsible for the housing capital side of that.

Anne Haugh: So, okay, so that's you, Emer?

Emer Concannon: That's me. That's me, Anne.

Anne Haugh: So the 23, they weren't new build then, they were Part Vs, is that what you're saying?

Emer Concannon: They were Part Vs and tenants in situ. Yes, I suppose I'll just explain a slight anomaly there in terms of what we returned to the department.

We returned 42 units to the department, which was an additional 15, and the difference being that the determination for the department is substantive

completion. And whereas in for the NOAC it's the keys must be handed over, so there's that slight difference in timeline.

So our housing delivery wasn't as we had liked in 2025, and there's plenty of reasons for that. And in terms of underestimation of the site works that had to be taken place in some developments, and some delays from utilities from Uisce Éireann and ESB. But also in terms of the site management and tradespeople actually holding on to the retention of site management staff and trades proved quite difficult in some sites. There was a big turnover, which incurred delays on sites.

But we have a very good pipeline of delivery at the moment. We have 284 units on site at the moment that will be delivered between 2026 and 2027. So we really have a very good pipeline for the next few years. And our new HDAP, which we gave to the department a number of weeks ago, we are exceeding; we will be exceeding the target that was set for us for the next for the next four years. So certainly going forward, our housing delivery will be very, very positive.

Anne Haugh: Okay, thanks for that. And then just the other housing one, before I hand over to Noel here, is in relation to the private rental inspections and the target. Obviously, the expectations of the department are 25% to be inspected on an annual basis. Sligo was, I think, just at 8.49% and was one of just five local authorities who had lower than 10% inspection rate. I suppose, again, is there a particular reason for that or is it a resource issue or what improvements are being made to improve those inspections?

Brían Flynn: So that's back to me, Anne. Yeah, so, a resource issue in 2025, which we have corrected. We have recently recruited a third party, an external company, to work with us on RTB inspections, and we've hit the ground running. I'm glad to report we're inspecting about 250 tenancies a month now. And so, I'm confident that we're going to meet our 2026
targets.

Anne Haugh: Okay, so you expect to bring it up to the 25%?

Brían Flynn: Absolutely, absolutely. Yeah, and equally… with stock condition surveys.

Anne Haugh: And are they working solely for you? Are some of your own staff doing inspections?

Brían Flynn: I still have one member of staff doing inspections, and then we will do the re-inspections.

Anne Haugh: Okay, thanks for that.

Declan Breathnach: Sorry, just going back on the reletting, the 20.7 is impressive, fair play. With the constraints, obviously, of procurement and even then to operate locally, you said the figure is about 15,000. Do you have, say, a retained repair team within the council? You mentioned, for example, a lot of the properties are just clean-outs and minor works. Do you have a team in-house, outside of going to contract?

Brían Flynn: We have a very small housing team that could simply go in and do that clean-out, but we would have to outsource the actual deep clean. We do have a framework for repairs, and so, you know if we got a void back, that simply requires us to be cleaned out, deep-cleaned and a couple of minor repairs. That framework is there to facilitate that but no, Declan, for the most part, we're using SupplyGov on a unit-by-unit basis to turn it around.

Declan Breathnach: Okay, thanks.

Noel Harrington: Yeah, thanks. Thanks to Martin and your team again for coming up. Again, just on the PI's, just a couple things now. The first thing I want to ask, you have touched on it a few times on it already, that's on the C1s: the staffing. And I know you mentioned once or twice on the staffing challenges you've had, but you've still recorded a reduction in the whole-term equivalents over the last couple of years. And it's just an opportunity for you to explain how that has come about in a fuller context.

Marie Whelan: Yeah, it is a reduction, but it's kind of fluctuated. It's not massive, you know; it's still around the 410/420, you know, and as Martin said, 37 in, 36 out, timing, delays, you know, the whole process. We had to run some competitions twice this year. It's about recruitment, you know; it's again Martin talked about the technical team for the TII. It's not an intentional reduction on staffing numbers and cutting, you know.

Martin Lydon: Yeah

Noel Harrington: And I can take from that then, it's not because of the challenges you've had with the…

Martin Lydon: No

Marie Whelan: No.

Martin Lydon: I think there's two other factors, Noel, as well. One factor will be in our strategic workforce plan, if you actually looked at our age profile, we have a high level of people moving on to pension as well, and then there's that time lag of being able to recruit into that post. And then the other element was we were quite successful, if that's the right term, or our staff made decisions about their careers in moving to Uisce Éireann.

So staff that would have originally been on our numbers, they actually moved to Uisce Éireann, and there's no replacement for those numbers because the job and the role went with them.

Noel Harrington: Is that for ye largely complete?

Martin Lydon: One person. We're down to one person, which will be resolved. So again, the HR team worked constructively and very well with team members, so they made the right decision for their careers and their lives. But they've all, in the main, decided to go to Uisce Éireann now.

Noel Harrington: Thank you. The next area, just to focus on, I suppose it's almost like a curiosity really, is in the environment section, E5 and E6. E5 is the cumulative energy performance, and E6 then is the public lighting programme. I'm going to try to group them together, because on the E6, on the public lighting programme you perform very, very well in an LED public lighting programme.

However, on the energy on the cumulative energy performance indicator, not so well, you know. And like while our performance indicators measure what they measure, there's kind of one dimensional element to them. Is there anything on why you have a good performing LED public lighting programme, but a poor performing cumulative energy savings PI. Is there a drag on that performance within the council or can you give an explanation as to that?

Jim Molloy: I think it goes back to earlier structures and how we were delivering things. We have established the machinery yard and energy efficiency as one team now and there's a specific, specifically qualified engineer in that team around energy efficiency, as well as our climate action team. So there's a lot of work going on, particularly this year, between the Pathfinder project whereby we've done a lot of work on Sligo Fire Station and our main county building on energy efficiency and that, work that was outstanding, it was on old oil-fired boilers and that as well. So there were high energy usage, high CO2 production and there's been a lot of work and that's coming to an end now.

But equally with putting the energy efficiency in with the machinery yard and that side of things we've centralized all fleet management. The old system was each department organized their own fleet vehicles, and in many cases they had bought the fleet vehicles and a lot of the fleet goes back, is 26 years old, 25 and 26 years old. By moving that to the machinery yard now, we're now bringing in the electric vehicles, but also the machinery yard is responsible for acquiring vehicles for each section and looking at what their demand is, and telling them if they can go electric, or if we want to have to stay diesel, for example. The vast majority of cases we're moving to electric now and we're starting to introduce electric vehicles into the fleet and we expect that's the big turnaround.

And in our climate action reports and our energy efficiency reports it is actually fleet and fuel usage has been the big drawdown and dragging us down on that side. As you say, the public lighting is essentially complete at this stage. There's some outlying, but they're problematic to do with cabling and different issues, so over the next, let's say, 12 to 18 months that'll be complete.

And as you said, it’s a very high performance on that side, but it has been on the fleet management side even within the fire service, for example. The fleet vehicles there can take the hydrogenated vegetable oil, but trying to source that locally has been a problem. It's now coming in, so that option is now becoming available as well. So that has been a significant task.

One of the other issues just with even electrifying the fleet is actually getting them ESB connections for that high usage, high charge, and getting them into the depots. And that is, that has been and continues to be a significant problem. Even at the county council now, at the county hall, we have a number of new charging points put in for fleet vehicles. And because of the fleet management

and parking of the vehicles at the depots at night, that makes it much more streamlined. So they get charged overnight and then used, so the litter wardens, waste inspectors, all that have gone electric. There's a few others that do need to go in a very short time, but it is a roll-out process and we're now actually starting to make headway.

Noel Harrington: On the building side of it, I presume there's been, obviously part of the programme, it must be part of the programme in bringing in energy efficiencies. Where are you with that then? Obviously, a better picture I presume.

Jim Molloy: A much better picture, and it'll be next year before we really start to see the benefits of it. But again, and it came up with the management team last week, is looking at how we manage it now and that energy efficiency and actually monitoring the buildings and getting the reports back and actually making sure the building is being managed effectively as well. It's not just a case of it's this date, switch on heating, or it's this date, switch it off, you know, it's actually looking at what is the demand, what is the usage of that time, and looking at the best, the best options available to us.

As I said, like it is, some of the buildings are easier to deliver but even with County Hall that work was done with County Hall still fully operational, and it has had certain issues of people jumping around to get rooms done but it has actually gone very smoothly and we were very happy with the contractors involved in that as well. But again, it is a body of work.

When we go to look at our City Hall, then it's more of a heritage building and there'll be other challenges with that. But again, these are all planned works and it's getting that delivery through the process.

Fire stations are generally wide-open spaces, and they're hard to actually control the energy issues in them, but there's been a lot of work trying to seal them off where we can. And ensure that at least the offices, the energy efficiency is as good as it can be in that.

Noel Harrington: In the area offices?

Jim Molloy: Yeah

Martin Lydon: Yeah just on that as well, I think we're responsible for the regional sports centre building and I think we're looking at that, and it could be quite exciting, we're looking at geothermal for the regional sports centre so we're making inroads. It's like all, the lead time is quite long in getting to the contract phase and everything else. But as Jim has just said there, I think that there'll be progress over the next number of years. But on the fleet side, we need the infrastructure to make it work.

Noel Harrington: So to summarise really, the drag is pretty much in the fleet side…? where the challenges are?

Jim Molloy: Yeah, and that team includes the ZEVI Team in that as well. And just as Martin mentioned, the geothermal, that's part of the GEMINI project. TUD were involved in that as well. But again, that will heat the pool, say in the sports centre. But equally we're looking at that and rolling it out into district heating and looking at the connections maybe to the hospital and to the university, because again they'd have the big demand of seeing how we can share that and get that delivered. Again, the challenge with district heating is actually getting infrastructure in place because we all know our roads are full as it is, and we don't want to go digging up roads again, where as far as possible. And depending on the amount of civil work, you know, you could lose the benefit of actually doing it. Even though it'll be a long-term gain, you don't want to take that too big a hit on that as well.

Noel Harrington: Thank you.

Michael McCarthy: Thank you, Noel. Miriam.

Miriam McDonald: Okay. I'm Chair of Working Group Three, which looks after customer service and communications. So I suppose my first question is, do you have a communications team or person?

Marie Whelan: Yes, currently vacant just since summer, but we've always had, I suppose, again, we operate very lean, you know. There's other responsibilities there as well, like FOI, data protection, you know, corporate, there's two Grade VIIs in corporate supporting the members and the whole meetings process, all that whole corporate affairs. And then we would have a staff officer involved in the whole media output and speeches and all that. There's an overlap with the

whole communications and the members meeting their requirements and clerical admin as well. So yeah.

Miriam McDonald: Is that all under one person?... Or, say, on the media side, would you have somebody else?

Marie Whelan: No, it's all within the team, and there's an SEO then shared between HR and corporate so, you know, it's tight, but it comes from having to operate like that.

Miriam McDonald: And do you carry out customer surveys?

Marie Whelan: No, we haven't done that now.

Miriam McDonald: And what about monitoring complaints?

Marie Whelan: Yeah, we have the whole complaints process online, submit your details. I suppose a lot of complaints come in via phone and by email. And I suppose our main areas of complaints are housing, roads, and environment. So, in developing our IT systems, I thought it might come up in the performance indicators there, on where my costs were coming from, but we had, you know, years that we didn't invest in IT, and we survived in all the difficult financial years. I suppose you just cut everything. And we invested in three main systems around, which are the platforms to communicate with people: CRM and our GIS, because there's a lot of map and planning and all that and then our own internal Microsoft365 and phone system and all that. So everything is monitored, captured.

Miriam McDonald: So is the CRM system in place already?

Marie Whelan: Oh, it is, yeah. Fully operational for a number of years and lots of online interaction on grants and the whole defective blocks. All those areas that have come in in the last few years have been brought in through those platforms, as we call them, you know, so all is, yeah.

Miriam McDonald: Okay. And what about, you know, customer culture, you know, we had the customer service workshop in Kilkenny two weeks ago, and we got a very, it was a very interesting and, you know, very advanced,

I would say, presentation from Meath in relation to implanting a customer service culture in the whole organisation. You know, because, you know, you can view it that customer service or customer communications is just the responsibility of the department, or it's in everything we do. And I'm just wondering, has there been any, and I appreciate, you know, there have been other issues, but has there been much discussion in terms of customer service culture within?

Martin Lydon: Yeah. I suppose, well, the answer from me is yes. In relation to, I think I've been very clear with our senior management group that we're here to serve the 70-odd thousand citizens of Sligo, and that's our key role. That said, we do realise we have some training to do, and we did respond to the NOAC questionnaire on the customer survey. So, we are sort of reinvigorating the training, and we're going to come up with a new procedure. And a number of my colleagues have come up with really good plans. I think we're not going to reinvent the wheel; there's a lot of good practice out there, and we just need to take some of that good practice.

So we are, starting in January '27, we're going to roll out training again to all our staff about the importance of customer service, why we're here, why we're public servants. And I think that'll help us through to the next stage. Because I think we've put the platforms in place. Like Marie said, the CRM
came in- that new CRM- about two years ago. The one we had wasn't working; it was broken, but we fixed that. We use the MyCoCo platform considerably. Our head of IS is on the working group, so we're in a position of strength or an advantageous position, we're there to be able to look at these products and see if they work for us.

So, for example, our councillors now have their own app that we encourage them to use. They don't all want to use it, and I understand that fully. They're like our clientele. Not everybody wants to be in the IT world, and it's up to us to find a workaround in relation to that. But I think we know we've got some work to do. And I suppose we knew we were coming here today. That focuses the mind a little bit. And that's why we know from January '27 we need to start the training.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah, I thought it was interesting when you were talking about getting the groups together to look at individuals' roles in terms of developing the corporate plan. And that was what Meath did in terms of

customer service. Because, you know, everyone can say they're into customer service, but if someone's at the front desk and someone in the back office isn't giving them the information, you know, you need the whole workflow to be working. And so, they got teams together to look at the workflow, so the customer service went right throughout the organisation.

In terms of the CRM system and, say, even the complaints, do those reports, I mean, obviously they would go to heads of departments, but do they actually go to the senior management team? Does the senior management team review any customer service statistics?

Martin Lydon: No, is the answer to that, Miriam.

Miriam McDonald: Yeah. Which in itself would drive the culture.

Martin Lydon: It would, it would. And I think we do share where we get emails congratulating us, to be honest, because usually it's because a member of staff has delivered excellent service, and you want them to realise it's been acknowledged that they delivered excellent service. But no, I think what we do have, actually, though, we do have a management suite of reports for us.

Now, the CRM is not on there, the sort of stuff we have on there really is our housing allocations, looking at our overtime, looking at vacancy, Croí Cónaithe grants, and all that sort of stuff. So, we do have, our IT section have developed this management suite which gives us dashboards very quickly to look at. So, I suppose, in the learning from today is we should add the CRM to that management suite.

Miriam McDonald: It's more about adding an external voice into that management team, you know, as much as internal.

Martin Lydon: Absolutely. Yeah.

Miriam McDonald: And having said all that, you have scored very well in the last customer survey in terms of how queries are handled. So, I'm just wondering what have you done to achieve that?

Marie Whelan: We improved from '24 to '25, and we're also above the Regional. I suppose it's the ethos and the culture that's in the place, you know.

There is that commitment to answer, to resolve, and even though it's not formalised in every section, it is happening there, you know.

Miriam McDonald: I think it's one of the challenges when we go to other local authorities, you know, because there's the kind of old local authority ethos which had that whole customer, sorry, public service and then how you bring that through when you recruit new people, you know. And as you say, it's a cultural thing.

Marie Whelan: The change of style of people, you know. It's the phone system, it's the talking, and it's the meeting, and there's lots of change there. But we still, we're still strong on that focus, but definitely, we're working on it in corporate services to restructure the whole ethos. And it will come in under IPM that we talked about earlier. There's monthly meetings for each section at an SEO level for all staff in that section, and it's minuted, as Martin said. So, customer, it'll kind of be based on health and safety. Health and safety has operated across the organisation at that level, that everyone heard about it and has a buy-in to it, and customer services will operate.

Miriam McDonald: Exactly, it should be a similar...

Marie Whelan: Yeah, that's the plan.

Miriam McDonald: And finally, just a final thing, I suppose I'm ending on a plea. So, we have twice a year; we have workshops in Kilkenny. Early in the year, February or March, we have the good practice workshop. And then, as I mentioned two weeks ago, we had the customer service workshop. So it would be really good to highlight something that Sligo has done, and maybe it's in the inclusive area or, you know, but if you could have a thinkabout a project that you'd like to put forward.

The purpose, it really is the main, is that it should be of value to another local authority. You know, to, like, I mentioned Meath, you know, a lot of local authorities there, that two weeks ago we're interested in that, you know, something that you've done that you think would be of value, as you say, rather than reinventing the wheel, you know.

Martin Lydon: Yeah, listen, look, I'm very conscious we haven't presented at one of those. I do think we have an excellent story to say around our Sligo Unlimited Project there. So, I think we'd like to present on that.

Just on the customer service, just a couple of other things there, we do extensively use consult.ie as well, which, you know, we went through our variation process in relation to county development plans. It's a great tool to be able to handle that.

And also on our communication side, very conscious that we're going to be given Irish language targets as well. So, when we brought in our communications person, they were also our Irish Officer. So, we are looking for a certain skill set when we do go back out.

Miriam McDonald: And communications has become very complex as well. I'm thinking of- sorry to cut across you now- but I'm thinking of some of the good things you've done on the tourism side, which all builds the image, but on the other hand, then you've all the social media piece to manage, you know.

Martin Lydon: Yeah, so look, I do think we're in a much better space because we've resourced it. It's like all these things. If you have money and you resource things, things do improve. And you know, the corporate team, I'm not saying it's got very big, but it has got bigger, in looking to address these issues with the Grade V communications piece. And then obviously, we are recruiting again on the Grade VII to come back in. So, look, we've done very well in relation to that sort of piece with communicating with our elected members who actually then can project a positive image of the council. And we just need to we need to carry on with that work.

Marie Whelan: Just on the social media, like, we've huge volumes on that on our viewing and on our members. And we had a very significant summer as a result of some of the tourism items that Martin had in his introduction. Like we had peak on the 30th of June, which was when the ship arrived in Sligo. So, yeah, the message is out there.

Miriam McDonald: You have given some lovely stories there.

Marie Whelan: Yeah.

Miriam McDonald: Thank you.

Martin Lydon: Thanks.

Michael McCarthy: Yeah, Declan. Then John.

Declan Breathnach: Yeah, a very quick one. I was impressed with your presentation, in terms of, as Miriam was referring to, your movements in tourism and wherever. Could you elaborate on the Galeón Andalucía project, and indeed the AIM Centre and what you're achieving there, as I think it's important to hear. Thanks so much.

Martin Lydon: Yeah, I'll take the ship first. I suppose, again, I suppose, everything's about relationships, partners, so you can actually deliver. I think especially in a county the size of Sligo, it's really important to have those partnerships. And we've got a very good relationship with Fáilte Ireland. And we've delivered on capital projects, we've delivered on different things for them. So, then they approached our tourism officer saying would we be responsive to the ship coming to Sligo.

And yes, we did have to find money to do it, but the economic piece that came back into the town was just incredible and the number of visitors and also the publicity that it brought. But it was that relationship with Fáilte Ireland that enabled that to happen and move very quickly. And look, I think that's all credit to the tourism team. And I think, again, by delivering the way they did, I'm pretty sure other stuff will come our way in relation to.

The AIM Centre is an interesting one. It started really for manufacturing SMEs between ourselves, Leitrim County Council, and the Atlantic Technological University. Obviously, the ATU has been through its restructuring as becoming part of the university, they're no longer a shareholder in that company. We've become the primary, or the biggest, shareholder with 67% and 33% to Leitrim.

And Kathleen was talking about earlier, about do you worry about these companies being a going concern and everything else. Well in the case of the AIM Centre, it needed to diversify because the ecosystem wasn't there in the Northwest, within the SMEs, the appetite for moving into AI and everything else. So, being part of the board, a decision was taken to go for Smart Region

Funding from Enterprise Ireland, and to offer test beds and an AI factory to the whole island of Ireland.

And we're working our way now through that because I think it's very important that the council is involved in that work. And also, it's now given us a bit of a seat at the table in relation to where we go, in relation to AI within the sector, because we can fall back on the AIM Centre, who have got all this experience- not a lot of it, I understand, to be honest with you Declan- but they've got all this experience that we can share and not only with industry but also within the sector. So it's still in its infancy, but it will react and be agile and flexible, and that's the beauty of having the company outside the council, to be able to react to what's going on in the environment.

Michael McCarthy: Thank you.

John Byrne: Just in relation to your Irish language policy. Do you have any policy in relation to place names or naming the estates in Irish. I mean, I'm a Galwegian and every new housing estate has an Irish place name. So, I'm just wondering, you know, even a small effort to promote the Irish language, is that something you would consider?

Martin Lydon: All place names, we have a committee that's made up of councils as well. The Place Name Committee and our Heritage Officer is involved in that. Now, some have Irish names, but then some have pretty bland names as well, John. So, it really depends on sort of the area and
the type of development that we're in. But that falls under you, Emer.

John Byrne: Is it something you consider?

Emer Concannon: It's quite an active committee and, you know, it's very robust in the way it works.

John Byrne: Okay. Thanks.

Michael McCarthy: Just one final question from myself. Thank you again for your interaction. It's quite informative. Is there anything else, Martin, in your thinking that we haven't covered that you feel we should be aware of, given our role as the adjudicator, the independent adjudicator of local government? Any

other issue that we haven't dealt with that you may think we should be aware of?

Martin Lydon: Yeah, I suppose, I mean look, my trade, I'm an accountant, so I do love figures. And I look at our funding overall, and this can't be changed, but it's going to impact on the sector overall. I think our funding is very similar to what it was in 2008. Our pension bill in 2008 was €3 million. Our pension bill now is €8 million. That affects frontline services. So, you know, the pension bill is getting bigger. And it will continue to get bigger, I'd say, for another 10/15 years.

But that ultimately will have an impact on performance because we have to meet our pension and our payroll bill. But if funding doesn't increase in correlation with that, then there is going to be an impact. And I think that is across the whole sector that that will happen. And it's something that's hard to capture, and it's not sometimes a subject we like talking about, but it has to be paid for.

Michael McCarthy: Okay, super. So that concludes our meeting. I want to thank you again for your interaction here with us in Custom House. We wish you well.

Martin Lydon: Thank you. Thanks very much, Chair. Thank you, everybody. Thank you.