

Finance Strategic Policy Committee

Minutes of Meeting Held 17th September 2020

Cllr Séamas McGrattan, Chair, welcomed the committee members to the Round Room in the Mansion House and set out the protocols to be adhered to during the meeting.

1. Draft Minutes of the Finance SPC meeting held on 24th June 2020

The draft minutes were proposed by Cllr. P McCartan and seconded by Cllr. James Geoghegan. The minutes were agreed.

2. Matters arising from correspondence:

Correspondence items were noted.

3. Rates Alleviation Scheme

K. Quinn advised that the City Council are awaiting the introduction of the regulations for this scheme.

Agreed: Cllr. J. Geoghegan asked that correspondence should issue to the Minister seeking the enactment of relevant legislation and introduction of the regulations.

4. Factors Impacting the Maintenance of Dublin City Council's Road Network

D. Collins, A/Executive Manager, Environment and Transportation Department, presented a comprehensive report to the members identifying the factors impacting the maintenance of Dublin City Council's road network.

The main factors identified were:

Funding constraints

In 2020, Dublin City Council will invest €12.5m in the annual works programme made available from the City Council's revenue and capital budgets facilitating the restoration and maintenance of approximately 14km of regional and local roads and the repair/renewal of approximately 11km of footpaths. Due to funding constraints decisions have to be made on the prioritisation of roads for repair and inclusion on the annual programme. These works are supplemented by reactive works such as the repair of potholes.

Traffic volumes, transport modal share and transport modal shift

Statistics on the annual survey of road user trends in 2018 was presented. It was noted that 60,000 vehicles crossed over the canals during a 3 hour period along with a further 40,000 pedestrians and cyclists.

In addition, increased economic activity has led to increased levels of construction activity and the associated construction traffic travelling on Dublin's roads and streets. This activity reduces further the serviceable life of roads and footpaths and warrants intervention and investment in reactive maintenance and planned works.

Dublin City Council further works to promote sustainable transport measures and encourage modal shifts towards walking and cycling. However, it is necessary that there be an appropriate and proportionate level of investment in the road's assets in the interest of protecting road safety particularly for these pedestrians and cyclists.

Impact of utility openings and reinstatements

It was noted that road openings and reinstatements can have a detrimental impact on the structural integrity of roads and reduce overall design life. This necessitates

additional maintenance requirements therefore impacting the need for increased funding resources.

Severe weather events/ winter maintenance

The winter maintenance programme covers the treatment of approximately 300km of the road network with gritting salts by specifically trained staff.

Examples of the impact of severe weather events such as Storm Emma involved €6.3m worth of damage to roads and streets. No additional funding was available from governments and these necessary remedial works were funded from Dublin City Council's own financial resources.

Traffic permits and restrictions

Necessary works are carried out in the evening, during night time hours and at weekends to minimise the disruption to the city environment. Such restricted timings have a significant cost implication on tenders submitted by contractors. In addition, the necessary temporary traffic management arrangements for these works are more complex and costly.

Planned maintenance versus reactive maintenance.

Underinvestment in planned maintenance results in a greater need for reactive maintenance such as pothole repairs and tree trip hazards on footpaths.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The Roads Maintenance Division has adapted a new pod system requiring additional PPE safety equipment during the current pandemic. In the initial months of April and May productivity levels fell when it became necessary to reduce the number of crews operating across the city to reduce risks to staff and ensure continued delivery of critical services.

At the conclusion of Mr. Collins's report, the members had a number of queries and comments for response. Items covered were:

- Skills sets of staff with regard to direct labour –v- contracted works
- Future planning for specific developments such as Bus Connects, Luas or significant building
- Reinstatement of roads/footpaths by utility companies and potential penalisation for poor works.
- Comparison of Dublin's allocation of funding for the roads programme with other local authorities.
- Condition of cycle lanes in the city
- Level of insurance claims made as a result of road conditions.
- Breakdown of where the NTA stimulus funding has been spent.
- Use of the European Investment Bank as a funding source for a comprehensive roads maintenance programme.
- Attrition levels of staff with specific skill sets and what is happening to address this loss.

Cllr. S. McGrattan, Chair, acknowledged the appreciation of the Committee for the work of the road maintenance crews over the past months.

Due to time constraints for the overall meeting, members were asked to email through to the Finance Department any questions they had so that a comprehensive list of responses could be co-ordinated.

5. DCC's ICT Transition and Response to Covid 19

Claudio Libanori, SEO, IS Department provided a report to the members giving an overview of the role of the IS Department during the current Covid 19 pandemic restrictions. The report covered the provision of services and usage in the following areas:

Citrix Remote Working

This service became the primary remote working solution for DCC staff. Remote working was immediately made available by the IS department for 1,200 remote users and gradually increased to a current rate of 2,300 users.

Laptops

Using strategic supply partners, over 850 laptops were provided to staff to meet demand.

Mobile Phones and Tablets

450 additional phones and 200 additional tablets were provided to staff.

Security

The IS Department were in a position to scale up the existing security environment which significantly reduced the risks associated with the increased level of remote working. A review of security levels was undertaken and no risks were identified.

Remote Telephony

Measures which allowed remote access to the Council's telephone systems was introduced and the Covid helpline was set up for at risk members of the public to access non-emergency and non-medical supports.

Microsoft Teams

The facility for 1,500 users to access the secure video and audio conferencing system was rolled out to staff.

Introduction of New Applications

There were a number of additional applications made available to support government initiatives such as the Restart Grant, Restart Grant plus, Community Grants and the Rates Waiver schemes.

Service Level Agreements

Throughout the current pandemic restrictions, the IS Department have been able to maintain the agreed Service Level Agreements with all department.

Members noted the following points:

- Queries regarding the introduction of a hybrid model for physical/remote council meetings were raised
- Expansion of data limits for councillors' mobile data usage
- The cost of investment in IT equipment was noted at €1.7m

At the conclusion of this item, members complimented the staff and management of the IS Department and wished that the hard work and dedication of the staff should be acknowledged.

6. Restart Grant Update

Antoinette Power, Head of Financial Accounting, presented an update outlining the introduction of the Restart Grant and more recently the Restart Grant Plus scheme.

Statistics for the Restart Grant which closed on 22nd July 2020 were presented showing overall applications paid/rejected and the grand total of payments made. This update provided details on initial funding received of €27.6m and €7.3m in hand at the closure of this scheme with €20.28m paid out to 3,853 applicants. An appeals process is being developed in conjunction with Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment for businesses that missed out on the Restart Grant deadline of 22nd July and 4 appeals were received with a total value of €13,107.

The introduction of the Restart Grant Plus commenced in August 2020 whereby enhanced grants with new minimum/maximum levels of €4,000 and €25,000 respectively are available. This scheme was expanded to take in medium sized firms and independent hotels with up to 250 employees. Turnover figures have also expanded and the criteria of loss of 25% in turnover is still in effect. This new scheme is open to rate paying sports clubs and charity shops. Those businesses who did not apply/qualify for the initial scheme are now eligible to complete an application form and declaration form. Top up grants to previously eligible businesses are available. Up to 17th September, €35m have been paid out to 5,001 businesses under this scheme and the closing date is 30th September 2020. In summary, a total of €55m has been paid out across the two schemes and funding in the amount of €62m has been received from DETE.

The issue of additional payments to wet pubs is under consideration by government however, to date no information is available to Dublin City Council. In addition, Dublin City Council are awaiting communication regarding any potential uplift in grants that may be applicable to Dublin in the event of further restrictions being imposed. A 20% uplift was applicable to businesses in Laois, Offaly and Kildare during their recent shutdown.

The following observations were made by members:

- Request an extension of the deadline of this scheme from DETE for the four Dublin local authorities and seek this corresponding uplift in grants for Dublin businesses.
- Further investment in the promotional campaign should be made while also acknowledging that Dublin City Council has issued a press release promoting the current scheme and that rate collectors are engaged with businesses to advise them of the scheme.
- Potential to link up the marketing of this scheme with the Enterprise Office
- All committee members were asked to promote this undersubscribed scheme.
- Acknowledge the extent and professionalism of the work carried out by the staff involved in these schemes.
- Minimal level of bureaucracy was required for this scheme
- Request that the Lord Mayor should be requested to send correspondence to the Minister regarding the extension of the forthcoming deadline.
- Queries around the reason for rejection of applications etc.

In conclusion, K. Quinn acknowledged the work of the staff in developing a robust system to work through these claims. She further acknowledged that the application rate is low.

Agreed: A request would be made to the Lord Mayor to write to the Minister regarding an extension to the Restart Grant Plus closing date of 30th September.

7. Rates Waiver Scheme

D. Murphy, Rates Office, gave a presentation on this scheme indicating that a rates waiver scheme has been introduced to cover the period 27th March – 27th September. It sets out the categories eligible and ineligible.

There is an appeal's process in place whereby businesses in the excluded categories, which are severely impacted by the pandemic, can apply for the waiver. Supporting documentation for this appeals application process was detailed and the assessment of those excluded must meet specific criteria. These appeals determined by Dublin City Council will be submitted to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage for approval by 30th November. There is €40m available nationally for this scheme.

It was noted that there is no application process for the waiver other than those falling into the specific eligibility categories. Dublin City Council has set up a dedicated email account for queries and details have been posted on the website. Currently revised rates bills with updated balances are issuing to rate payers.

The following observations were made by members on the following issues:

- The impact on excluded businesses in the office accommodation category
- The issue that excluded category businesses may consider not re-opening next year and the impact of this on the vibrancy of the city.
- Further information sought on the impact on certain sectors for next year.
- Impact on businesses whose turnover is impacted by closures must be taken into account
- The collection rates is currently at 80% in comparison to 73% for last year which may indicate possible full or prepayments by some businesses who may be eligible for refunds.
- Impact on vacancy rate applications for next year.

9,000 accounts approximately have paid their accounts in full and will be entitled to a refund. They will have the option to leave it on their account as credit or apply online for a refund. Correspondence is currently issuing to those eligible and ineligible for the waiver. The value of the waiver is €100m and the annual accrual is €357m.

8. Audit Committee Minutes of 30th January 2020

Minutes were noted

9. Motion from Cllr Alison Gilliland

Dublin City Council recognises the significant financial contribution made towards the operations of Dublin City Council by those living within its jurisdiction through the payment of their local property tax. Dublin City Council also recognises the various other financial supports provided to Dublin City Council either directly or indirectly from the public purse. Therefore, so as to communicate a tangible connection between Dublin citizen's LPT contribution and other public monies received and the services, amenities and supports provided by DCC to its citizens that an end of year, graphically illustrated, annual overview of spending leaflet be produced and made available/accessible to all DCC citizens. This leaflet should clearly allow citizens to connect their financial contribution both through their LPT and their taxes to the local services, amenities and supports they receive and experience from Dublin City Council.

Cllr Gilliland proposed the production of a type of infographic which will show the LPT contribution of citizens and Dublin City Council's spend for the year. The motion was seconded by Cllr. D. Barron.

Agreed: The motion was passed. K. Quinn advised that she will bring a report to the November Finance SPC meeting on this matter.

The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday 3rd November and the meeting arrangements will be circulated in advance.

Signed: Councillor Séamas McGrattan
Chairperson

Date: 17th September 2020

Members Present

Cllr Séamas McGrattan (Chairperson)
Cllr. Daryl Barron
Cllr Mary Callaghan
Cllr Anthony Connaghan
Cllr. Alison Gilliland
Cllr James Geoghegan
Cllr Dermot Lacey
Cllr. Paddy McCartan
Cllr. Nial Ring
Cllr. Darcy Lonergan
Eric Fleming, ICTU
Philip O'Callaghan, PPN
Aidan Sweeney, IBEC

Apologies

Cllr. Noeleen Reilly – observing online
Cllr. Daithí De Róiste – observing online
Jack Daly, Docklands Business Forum
Tara Lillywhite-Torpey, Dublin Chamber of Commerce – observing online
Professor Caroline McMullan, DCU

Officials

Kathy Quinn, Head of Finance
Antoinette Power, Head of Financial Accounting
Fintan Moran, Head of Management Accounting
Dermot Collins, A/Executive Manager, Environment and Transportation Department
Deirdre Murphy, Senior Executive Officer, Rates Office
Claudio Libanori, Senior Executive Officer, IS Department