

MINISTER PROVIDES UPDATE IN MONAGHAN

The programmes in place to address the ongoing homelessness crisis, a baseline review of Local Property Tax, plus the proposed roll-out of a survey on the role and remuneration of individual councillors, were some of the many issues addressed by Damien English TD, Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development, at the recent AILG Autumn Seminar in Monaghan. Here is a synopsis of his presentation at the seminar dinner.

It is only fitting that the focus has been on the impact that Brexit is having and its potential future implications on the border counties and beyond.

Many local authorities on both sides of the Border have agreements in place to co-operate in a number of thematic areas including emergency planning, renewable energy and green technology, tourism and recreation, sustainable economic growth and job creation.

It is important to give recognition, support and encouragement to the local authorities concerned for forming such strategic alliances and to promote the economic development and competitiveness of the region for the benefit of communities on both sides of the Border.

HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

Budget 2019 allocated an additional €30m for homelessness services, bringing total funding to €146m, an extra €60m in capital funding for additional emergency accommodation and €1.25bn for the delivery of new social homes.

The long-term solution to the homeless issue is to increase the supply of homes – as envisioned in Rebuilding Ireland, the Government's Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness.

The housing challenge cannot be solved overnight, but that is not to say that we are not endeavouring to provide ongoing support for those most vulnerable citizens in any way possible, while at the same time managing long-term programmes to create a stable and consistent housing sector capable of producing 25,000 houses per year through all channels.

Family Hubs: Many housing authorities are now delivering enhanced family-focused facilities, or family hubs, which offer a greater degree of stability than is possible in hotels. Such



Minister Damien English TD, Minister for Housing and Urban Development pictured with Cllr Luie McEntire, AILG President (right), and Cllr David Maxwell, Cathaoirleach of Monaghan County Council (left).

a setting allows for more intensive supports to be provided where they are needed. Crucially, families have been proven to transition more quickly through hubs and into tenancies.

A total of 23 hubs currently operate nationally and offer over 550 units of family accommodation in key urban housing authorities.

These family-focused facilities have been delivered, at a total estimated investment of €25m in capital funding with a further €20m in capital funding to support the development of additional hubs nationwide, demonstrating our belief in this model.

Homeless HAP: The Homeless HAP Place Finder Service has been successfully utilised across Dublin's four local authorities since February 2015, with more than 3,500 households currently being supported. A similar service began operating in Cork City in 2017.

We are now providing all local authorities with the option to



Minister Damien English, Cllr Pat Dunphy and Cllr Luie McEntire (AILG President) before the start of the seminar dinner at the Hillgrove Hotel in Monaghan on 25 October.

pay deposits and advance rental payments for any households in emergency homeless accommodation, in order to secure accommodation via the HAP Scheme.

To date, the Department has approved funding of 22 dedicated Placefinder officers nationally, who work with families experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness to identify a tenancy in the private rented sector.

Housing First: Innovative programmes will have a large part to play in helping to address homelessness. The most notable of these is the Housing First Programme, which aims to support a person who has experienced homelessness into permanent housing as quickly as possible without any preconditions.

A National Director of Housing First was appointed in February this year and a National Implementation Plan was launched last month that sets annual targets for each local authority.

Funding of €3m has been provided under the Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan 2018. In the longer term, the housing supports providing under Housing First will be met from within the Department's vote, with Health supports funded by the HSE.

Housing Adaptation Grants for Older & Disabled People: We are also increasing resources to other important housing programmes. The Housing Adaptation Grants, for example, allows people to continue living independently in their homes.

From a funding level five years ago of €43m supporting 7,000 people, this year the scheme has invested €66.25m, which will directly benefit 10,000 people. It is very important that these grants can be readily accessed, and my Department will continue

to work with local authorities to review delivery and streamline the application process.

NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK

The Government's National Planning Framework (NPF) will manage future population and economic growth, catering for one million extra people, 600,000 extra jobs and over 500,000 extra homes.

A key principle in the NPF is compact sustainable growth of our villages, towns and city centres. Achieving our compact growth goals will mean the regeneration of our villages, towns and cities while also ensuring a balance of growth across the Island.

Urban Regeneration Funding:

The National Development Plan backing the NPF will enable key objectives to be realised. The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, which has an allocation of €2 billion over the 10-year period of the NDP, will assist in

developing innovative projects and more compact regeneration focused development.

The application process for the URDF has now closed. My Department received in the region of 160 applications. A project advisory board has been established to evaluate the applications. It is envisaged that the first round of successful applications will be announced in November.

Land Development Agency: The strategic management of key potential regeneration sites, many of which are publicly owned, is a subject which Government has been considering in detail since the publication of the NPF.

The Government's Land Development Agency (LDA) will allow for a more strategic approach to the management of public lands. The LDA creates a new opportunity to use the State land bank to smooth land supply, disrupting speculation and stabilise house prices, while at the same time leading to better planning outcomes, less sprawl and less commuting.

The LDA will provide a national centre of expertise on regeneration to work with and assist local authorities and their experienced staff through providing additional available expertise in areas such as project management, finance, and procurement.

NEW STATUTORY PROVISIONS

A new regulation will be put in place which will exempt councillors from paying the standard €20 fee when making a submission on a planning application. The abolition of the €20 submission fee supplements a recommendation of the Mahon Tribunal that interventions made by councillors on planning applications be noted on the file and be available for inspection.

AILG AUTUMN SEMINAR

The take-up of this fee exemption provision will be monitored as I would not like to see it being abused, with councillors being used as a medium to facilitate avoidance of payment of the submission fee by members of the public. Ideally this fee concession should be used pragmatically for the purpose of promoting the objectives of the development plan and I hope it will be applied in that spirit.

A further aspect of the recent 2018 Planning Act that you will be pleased to hear about is the provision to submit a resolution to the Chief Executive requesting him or her to prepare a report on a proposal for a variation of a development plan for a specified reason, subject to the resolution being supported by three-quarters of the members of the local authority concerned. Where such a resolution is adopted, the Chief Executive will be obliged to submit a report within four weeks of the resolution.

I would hope that AILG members will see these new arrangements as positive developments that recognise the important role of councillors in the local government system.



Cllrs Eithne Loftus and Madeline Argue greet Minister Damien English upon his arrival to address delegates and guests at the Autumn Seminar dinner in the Hillgrove Hotel in Monaghan on 25 October.

LOCAL PROPERTY TAX

My colleague Minister Donohue is currently in the process of finalising a review of the Local Property Tax (LPT) and, in the recent Budget speech, stated that any future changes to LPT liabilities will be both moderate and affordable.

In the meantime, my Department has finalised the LPT allocations for 2019 amounting to €503m, which remains largely unchanged from the current year. It is interesting, and indeed very welcome to note, that local authorities are, in general, maintaining their current LPT rates in 2019.

This trend illustrates the responsibility elected members take on when undertaking the decision to vary their local LPT rates and their growing appreciation of the link between service provision, LPT income and the budgetary process.

LPT BASELINE REVIEW

In the context of the wider LPT review, Minister Murphy established a group comprising representatives from the Department, the CCMA and the AILG to establish a framework regarding the allocation of any additional funding that might be available as a consequence of the review.

The Group consulted with relevant stakeholders and had received 53 submissions, with 27 coming from local authorities. The contributions from councillors were particularly helpful in providing direct input and experience from the local authority perspective. Ministers Murphy and Phelan are now considering the outcome of the group's deliberations.

COMMERCIAL RATES

My Department is also aware of the importance of commercial rates as a funding source for local authorities. The Local Government (Rates) Bill has been published to address the modernisation of rates legislation, abatement schemes for

vacant properties and improving the collection powers of local authorities. It is intended to seek time in the current Oireachtas session to have the Bill proceed as efficiently as possible.

ROLE AND REMUNERATION

Finally, the issue of supports for councillors is one which has been the subject of much debate and commentary over the last year. It's important to support councillors appropriately, with due regard for transparency and accountability, to ensure that they can effectively carry out their role as public representatives.

Earlier this year Minister John Paul Phelan agreed with Minister Donohue to commission a review of the role and remuneration of councillors, and he appointed Ms Sara Moorhead SC to conduct this review.

Ms Moorhead has been consulting with appropriate stakeholders, including the AILG, which has provided a very detailed submission on behalf of its members.

SURVEY OF COUNCILLORS

It is intended that a survey of individual councillors will begin shortly and this will further inform the outcome of the review. The review will produce an interim report before the end of the year, with the timing of a final report to be considered thereafter.

When the review is complete, its findings will be the subject of discussion between my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and it will be submitted, thereafter, for the consideration of the Government.

The role of local authorities is crucial to the successful delivery of vital services and implementation of national policy at local level in a range of key areas.

I look forward to continued constructive engagement on the many policy issues and the many others besides in which local authorities play an active role.