

Minutes of the June Monthly Meeting of Athlone Town Council, which was held in the Civic Centre, Church Street, Athlone at 7.15p.m. on Tuesday 8th June, 2010.

Attendance:

Mayor: Cllr. M. Cooney

Members: Cllrs. S. Buckley Byrne, J. Henson, P. Hogan, G. McFadden, K. Molloy, K. Moran, A. O'Rourke and A. Shaw.

Officers: Mr. Pat Keating, A/Director of Services
Mr. John Walsh, Town Clerk
Mr. Alan Kelly, Town Engineer
Ms. Edel Martin, Housing Officer

Minutes:

It was proposed by Cllr. Moran,

Seconded by Cllr. Henson and resolved,

“That we hereby adopt and confirm the Minutes of the May Monthly Meeting which was held on May 4th 2010”.

Matters Arising:

Cllr. Buckley Byrne enquired if the Flood Committee meeting had been held and the Town Clerk advised her that this would be dealt with under this month's motions.

Cllr. McFadden enquired as to when the new Tourist Office signage would be put in place and was advised by the Town Engineer that this would be in place the following week.

Cllr. Hogan requested an update in relation to Sarsfield Square and the fencing along the railway line at Auburn Heights and Retreat areas. In relation to Sarsfield Square the Town Clerk advised that he had written to the Chairperson in the matter and that the fencing issue would be dealt with under the Motions.

Cllr. Cooney enquired as to the up to date position regarding planning enforcement concerning the old Athlone Shopping Centre, the gates at Burgess Park, Loughandonning Area Action Plan and the opening of Athlone Castle. In relation to the Old Shopping Centre, Mr. Pat Keating A/Director advised that the planning files were under investigation and a decision with regard to action would be taken in the coming weeks. In relation to the Gates at Wansboro field the Town Clerk advised that they had not been located. He also confirmed that Athlone Castle would remain open until such time as the construction work had commenced.

The Members unanimously joined in Cllr. Buckley Byrne's congratulations to Willow Park F.C. and Clonbonny F.C. on their recent successes and in Cllr. Hogan's congratulations to both Monksland and St. Peters.

Bus Eireann:

It was agreed to advise Bus Éireann that the Council would meet them at the July Meeting.

National People of the Year Awards

It was proposed by Cllr. Hogan,

Seconded by Cllr. Buckley Byrne and resolved,

“We hereby nominate the South Westmeath Hospice Committee for the National People of the Year Awards”.

Council Receptions:

It was unanimously agreed to hold Civic Receptions for the Midlands Vintage and Classic Car Association, Athlone Community College and Willow Park F.C.

Report on the proposed Development and Regeneration of Athlone Castle:

The Town Clerk indicated that the Council had conformed with the statutory requirements and the Members considered the Report of the County Manager as outlined hereunder in respect of Part 8 planning process for the regeneration of the Castle.

Report of the County Manager:

The Plans and particulars to develop and regenerate Athlone Castle as an Interpretative/Visitor Centre were advertised on March 27th 2010 and placed on public display and circulated to the prescribed bodies pursuant to the Planning & Development Acts 2000-2007 and Part 8 of the Planning & Development Regulations 2001-2006. The closing date for the receipt of submissions/observations dealing with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area in which the Castle is situated was May 24th 2010.

I have conformed with the statutory requirements and I now place this Report before you and any resolution to vary or modify it, or to decide not to proceed with the development must be passed by you not later than 6 weeks from the receipt of the Report.

A. Nature, Extent and Principal Features of the Site and Development:

Athlone Castle is located south of the Town Bridge on the west bank of the Shannon at The Docks/Market Place, Athlone.

The proposed development includes the access ramp and all the buildings and Courtyard within the curtain walls of Athlone Castle and the use of the buildings and Courtyard as an Interpretative/Visitor Centre in respect of the military history and personalities of Athlone. Ancillary uses include a Reception area and tea shop.

The development will enhance and upgrade the Castle Visitor Centre and the principal features of the proposed works will include the following:

- 1) The surfacing of the Ramp and Courtyard with granite sets and a resin bonded gravel with a total surface area of 896m² approx.
- 2) The demolition and removal of the out-buildings (store & toilet) measuring 20m² approx. beside the curtain wall on the eastern boundary of the Courtyard.
- 3) The demolition of the single storey lean-to at the eastern gable of the Barrack building measuring 13m² approx. and its replacement with a glazed balcony at 1st floor level, a Reception entrance and stairwell all measuring 25m² approx. Access opes at ground and first floor levels will also be provided to accommodate entry/egress to the Reception area and the balcony.
- 4) The removal of the modern staircases in the Barrack building and the removal of part of the first floor to create a double height-ceiling in the Reception area.
- 5) The demolition and removal of the modern single storey glazed link building in the south western corner of the Courtyard measuring 83m² approx. and its replacement with a new 2 storey glazed link building measuring 152m² approx. and a lift. The necessary opes will be created in the Armaments building south wall for access purposes.
- 6) The construction of a glazed link bridge between the armaments building and the Keep at first floor level and the provision of the necessary opes in both buildings.
- 7) The removal of the 2nd floor of the Keep to create a double height space for the re-enactment of the Siege of Athlone. The dome will also be replaced and a mobility impaired access will be constructed.
- 8) Where internal decoration is required best practice conservation principles will apply.
- 9) All the buildings within the Courtyard with the exception of the Gate Lodge will be used for the interpretation of various themes to form the Visitor Centre including a reception area and tea shop.
- 10) Interpretation and presentation will include the use of AV hardware, software, graphics, display panels, mounted exhibits and image projection.

B. Planning:

The Castle is zoned for “institutional, educational and community” uses in the Town Development Plan 2008-2014 and lies within the zone of Archaeological Potential. It is a National Monument owned by the State (Ref. WM 029-013) and protected by the National Monuments Act 1930 as amended and it is also a Protected Structure within the Town Development Plan 2008-2014.

The Town Development Plan includes the following specific policies and objectives in regard to tourism and our built heritage.

- P-NBH2** - It is the policy of the Council to protect and conserve buildings, structures and sites contained in the record of protected structures.
- P-NBH4** – It is a policy of the Council to retain where feasible, older buildings in Athlone which make a positive contribution to the character of the area or townscape and to encourage the rehabilitation, renovation and re-use of existing older buildings where appropriate.
- O-TMI** – To promote and facilitate the development of Athlone as a tourism centre.
- O-TM4** – Promote Athlone Castle as a tourist attraction and extend and upgrade the Museum and Interpretative Centre.
- P-TM2** – To promote Athlone as tourist destination
- P-TM3** – To harness the economic benefits of the tourism industry through sustainable means, including the conservation and protection of the built and natural heritage of the town, protection and enhancement of links within and to the Town and avoiding developments that would result in an adverse impact on tourism infrastructure provision.
- P-TM1** – The Council will co-operate with the County Development Board and other appropriate agencies in identifying and promoting the tourism assets of the town and will support development of tourism infrastructure in a sustainable and environmentally sensitive manner in the town.

It is considered that the proposed development will conserve, maintain and extend the life of Athlone Castle in a sustainable manner giving it a current economic/cultural use while maintaining its character and respecting its heritage. The development accords with the policies and objectives of the Town Development Plan and is in accordance with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

C. Submissions:

Details of the persons/organisations who made submissions/observations and the issues raised are summarised hereunder together with a response thereto.

1. Mr. Noel O’Gara, Ballinahown:

Issues:

- (a) The Castle was built as a stronghold to protect the ruling British and keep the Irish under control.
- (b) Spending €3m on this symbol of repression is an insult to generations of Irish people.
- (c) The Castle should be preserved and displayed as it functioned in the past.
- (d) The Castle is something to be understood and explained to future generations.

Response:

The issues raised do not relate to the proper planning and development of the area as required but the development will enable future generations to understand the Castle and its past through the interpretation that will be included.

2. Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government, Dublin:

Issues:

- (a) The Castle is a National Monument in State ownership.
- (b) All works need to be overseen by a qualified Archaeologist with the written consent of the Minister.
- (c) A method statement for the works shall be submitted to the Director of the National Monuments Service to obtain the consent of the Minister.
- (d) In principle the Department has no objection to the proposal.
- (e) The proposed building and finishes should not adversely affect the character and special interest of the Castle complex and mitigation measures should be recommended for adverse impacts.
- (f) Works affecting the historic fabric shall be supervised by a conservation professional.
- (g) Growth ring dating shall be employed to date the age of the floors in the Keep and

subject to nothing remarkable being discovered there would be no objection to the removal/relocation of the floors. It is likely that the floors post date 1793.

(h) Consideration should be given to leaving the timber ends in the walls as evidence of the floor levels.

Response:

The Council will conform with the requirements of the Department including the supervision as outlined in their submission and will seek the appropriate approvals and consents.

Recommendation:

I have considered the submissions and I present this Report to you for your consideration pursuant to the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2007, the Planning and Development Regulations 2001-2006 and in particular Section 179 of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

Having regard to the provisions of the Town Development Plan 2008-2014 I am satisfied that the development is in accordance with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area and I recommend that the proposed development of Athlone Castle as placed on public display be proceeded with, modified where I consider necessary to conform with any consent or approval issued by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

Cllr. Hogan welcomed it and queried the position regarding wheelchair accessibility. The Town Clerk advised that this was available by means of a lift. He also enquired if the audio presentation would be bilingual. The Town Clerk advised him that this matter was currently under examination. In response to Cllr. Hogan's query regarding the significance of 1793 the Town Clerk stated that anything prior to this date, was considered Medieval.

Cllr. O'Rourke added his support for the Report and added that he anticipated some consultation would take place with the OPW regarding the cleaning of the curtain walls and he also requested an update regarding the lighting systems. In response the Town Clerk stated that lighting will be included as part of the contract and the OPW will be maintaining the curtain walls in consultation with the Design Team.

Cllr. McFadden enquired if the timber ends for walls would be included as part of the recommendation and was advised by the Town Clerk that this matter would be included.

It was proposed by Cllr. Moran,

Seconded by Cllr. Hogan and resolved,

“Pursuant to the Planning & Development Acts 2000-2007, Part 8 of the Planning & Development Regulations 2001-2006 and in particular Section 179 of the Planning & Development Act 2000 we hereby approve of the development proposals to regenerate

Athlone Castle as advertised and modified by the recommendation of the County Manager”.

Midlands Region Homelessness Action Plan 2010 to 2013:

Ms. Edel Martin, Housing Officer took the Members through the main points of the draft Midlands Region Homeless Action Plan. She advised that due to the tight timeframe, a generic plan had been prepared but that greater detail in relation to Homeless Services would be included in the Homelessness Implementation Plan, which would be prepared before 31st January 2011.

Cllr. Buckley Byrne welcomed the Report and noted that there was no mention of the financial contribution made by Voluntary Groups themselves in the provision of homeless services in the Region. She added that she felt some aspects of the plan were more relevant to city situation and not a predominately rural region. Cllr. Hogan queried how much had been allocated from Athlone Town Council’s funds towards Homelessness in 2010. Cllr. Shaw welcomed the report adding that he felt that the implementation plan would have more relevance to the Council. Cllrs. McFadden, Moran and Henson added their support for the draft Plan with Cllr. McFadden noting that she hoped that there would be no reduction in services as a result.

In response the Housing Officer noted the comments of the Councillors and advised that the Implementation Plan would contain more detailed information with regard to the Homeless Services. She added that the current facilities in Athlone have a high level of occupation and are ahead of other authorities.

It was proposed by Cllr. Molloy,

Seconded by Cllr. Hogan and resolved,

“That we hereby adopt the proposed Midlands Region Homelessness Action Plan 2010 to 2013.”

Anti Social Behaviour Strategy:

The Housing Officer advised the Members that it was a requirement under the Housing Act 2009 for all Housing Authorities to adopt an Anti Social Behaviour Strategy by 30th October 2010. In advance of this there must be a consultation period and the approval of the Council was being sought to commence this consultation period.

It was proposed by Cllr. Molloy,

Seconded by Cllr. Hogan and resolved,

“That we approve the commencement of the consultation period for the proposed Anti Social Behaviour Strategy pursuant to the Housing Acts 1966-2009”.

Derelict Sites Athlone:

A report relating to dereliction in Athlone Town Council's administrative area was circulated to the Members. This report gave a snapshot of the current position regarding dereliction in the town. A total of 197no. sites had been examined to date since the legislation's inception in 1990, and at present 36no. sites were listed in the Register as being derelict. Ms Martin added that an additional 34no. sites were also under examination. It was proposed that the sites in the Register would be levied from this point forward and this process had commenced.

Cllr. Moran welcomed the report and queried as to what would happen if any sites listed in the register came under NAMA. Cllr. Shaw enquired as to when the levies would be imposed and Cllr. McFadden queried as to how these levies would be applied.

In response to queries raised Ms. Martin advised that the financial aspect of proposed levying would become apparent in the 2011 Budget and that the levies imposed would be based on the valuation of the sites included on the Register. She added that while finance would be welcome in this area, it would be preferable if dereliction were no longer an issue for the town. In response to Cllr. Moran's query regarding NAMA, the Town Clerk dated that such sites would be dealt with in the same way irrespective of who owned them.

The Members welcomed and noted the Report.

Planning:

The Town Clerk informed the Members that a planning application had been received from Messrs. Kelly & O'Sullivan for a retail and office development of 6776m² with a 10no. storey block and basement car parking at Station Road, Athlone. This development will materially contravene the Town Development Plan by virtue of the zoning of the site.

He indicated that the Council was amenable to granting permission for the proposed development and recommended that the statutory process be initiated and the proposed contravention be advertised. Cllr. Molloy enquired if the site had been approved for a tall building and the Town Clerk informed him that it had.

It was proposed by Cllr. Molloy,

Seconded by Cllr. Moran and resolved,

"Pursuant to the provisions of the Planning and Developments Act 2000-2007, we hereby approve of the implementation of the statutory process for a contravention of the Town Development Plan in respect of the application from Messrs. Kelly & O'Sullivan for a retail and office development with a 10no. storey block and basement car parking at Station Road, Athlone P.D. Ref. No.09-3039".

Managers Orders

The Members noted the summary of Managers Orders as circulated.

Question 1. Cllr. P. Hogan:
“Will this Council investigate flooding outside 41-43 Beechpark West and at Auburn Drive?”

Answer: Yes.

Question 2. Cllr. P. Hogan:
“Will this Council erect appropriate signage giving motorists early notification of roads with height restrictions particularly at Marine View, Old Coosan Road, Old Galway Road and the Ballymahon Road in an effort to ease traffic congestion?”

Answer: The Council is of the view that suitable signage is already in place in advance of the overhead bridges at these locations but same can be examined again.

Question 3. Cllr. K. Molloy:
“Can this Council review plaque on front of Castle (which gives history of Castle)?”

Answer: The matter will be examined in the context of the regeneration of the Castle.

Question 4. Cllr. K. Molloy:
“Has Coolevin Estate been taken in charge by Council?”

Answer: The process for the taking in charge of this Estate is underway.

Question 5. Cllr. A. O’Rourke:
“What is the status of the work which was agreed to be carried out to remove the temporary ‘2008 one-way system’ bollards outside O’Neill’s pub on Gleeson Street?”

Answer: Westmeath County Council intend to provide a footpath at this location within the coming two months.

Question 6. Cllr. A. O’Rourke:
“In light of the refurbishment of the Castle and the streetscape improvements in the same general area, can the Council redouble its efforts to have the old docks sheds removed or relocated?”

Answer: Waterways Ireland have requested the provision of alternative facilities and an acceptable site has been identified. The design of the

facility is currently underway and will in time be presented under Part 8 of the Planning & Development Regulations.

Question 7. Cllr. A. Shaw:

“What is the finding of the Council’s examination of the junction of The Beeches and the Coosan Point road as traffic calming measures were requested at the March 2010 meeting?”

Answer: The data for this survey is currently being compiled and it is intended to issue a report to the Council at the July 2010 meeting.

Question 8. Cllr. A. Shaw:

“Please clarify the position concerning the charging of VAT for Council Car Parking from 1st July, 2010 as introduced into Irish law by the Minister for Finance in last December’s Budget to comply with an EU Directive?”

Answer: The only service impacted upon by the V.A.T. requirement is off street car parking and it is proposed to absorb the costs in 2010 and retain the charges at current levels.

The impact for 2011 will be determined in the budget for that year.

Question 9. Cllr. G. McFadden:

“Would this Council provide the residents of St. Joseph’s Villas with a replacement seat for their Green area?”

Answer: Yes.

Question 10. Cllr. G. McFadden:

“Would this Council request Westmeath County Council to remove the red and white blocks at Gleeson/Mardyke Street and the Crescent?”

Answer: These barriers will be removed by Westmeath County Council on completion of the footpath within the coming 2 months.

Question 11. Cllr. S. Buckley Byrne:

“Why are there no lights on main bypass bridge over the Shannon when it is wired for Lights?”

Answer: There is no recollection of why lights were not provided when the bridge was opened 20 years ago but it is not considered that they are necessary at this time.

Acknowledgements:

The Members noted acknowledgements to Council correspondence from the Department of Environment, Heritage & Local Government, the Department of Health, the Minister for Justice and Westmeath Community Development Board. The Polish Ambassador also acknowledged the Councils condolences on the recent tragedy in Poland.

Thanks:

The Members noted letters of thanks to the Council from Athlone Agri Show for sponsorship, from Soroptimist International for the Civic Reception and from the Drama Festival for assistance given.

Opening of the Festival:

The Members noted a letter from the President thanking them for their kind invitation to open the Euro-Festival 2010, but regrettably she had to decline due to prior engagements.

Conferences:

The Members noted the location and cost of the following conference:

Buncrana AMAI Annual Conference 9th-11th September, 2010

Health Care Issues:

In response to motions the Town Clerk stated that a Deputation from the Council will meet with Minister Harney on Wednesday next and the closing of Loughloe House, the primary care unit and services at St. Vincent's Hospital will be among the issues raised.

Flood Defence Update:

The Town Clerk stated in response to Cllr. Hogan's motion that the Brick Island area did not qualify under the benefit criteria and the OPW will now be requested to reconsider this application on the basis of a larger local contribution. In the case of Parnell Square / Deerpark area, the OPW have indicated that the €1.8m required would not be available in advance of the completion of the Shannon River Basin Study (CFRAM) and it is not technically possible to provide flood mitigation measures in this area on a cellular basis. He added that the Council is not aware of flooding at Priory Park.

Cllr. Hogan said flooding had occurred in some of the back gardens in Priory Park due to no fault of the residents and the idea of having to wait until 2013 was not reasonable for people in Parnell Square/Deerpark. The Town Clerk agreed to write to the Minister again for further clarification.

VAT on L.A. Services:

The Town Clerk informed Cllr. Hogan that the only Council service impacted upon by the V.A.T. requirement is off-street parking and it is proposed to absorb the costs in 2010 and retain the charges at current levels. He said the impact for 2011 will be determined in the Budget for that year.

Traffic Survey at Cornamaddy N.S.:

In response to Cllr. Henson's motion, the Town Clerk stated that the matter will be referred to the Road Design section of Westmeath County Council for analysis. Cllr. Henson said there were major concerns here over traffic and pedestrian safety and other Members agreed with this. The Town Clerk however advised that it was a matter for the Area Members as it is a county road. Cllr. Henson then requested that the Town Council be given an update at the next meeting.

Overgrown trees:

The Town Clerk informed Cllr. Henson that a scheme involving the removal of these trees was costed in 2008 at €21,000 but funding was not available. Trimming is not an appropriate solution for these trees as their nature only allows limited removal of growth. The Town Engineer agreed to have their removal re-costed.

Sign at Assumption Road:

In response to Cllr. Henson's motion, the Town Clerk stated that the area at the rear of Assumption Road will be examined and signage installed if necessary.

Silt Deposits:

The Town Clerk stated in response to Cllr. O'Rourke's motion that the areas effected by the river deposits are in the functional area of Westmeath County Council to whom the matter will be referred, as well as to Waterways Ireland and the Heritage section of the D.O.E.H.L.G. Cllr. O'Rourke was unhappy with the response and felt the deposits should be investigated and acted upon immediately. Cllrs. Moran and Buckley-Byrne supported the motion. Cllr. Cooney noted their concerns and stated that the matter would be taken up at County level. The Town Clerk again indicated that it would be referred to the County Council for examination.

Cleaning of Canal:

In response to Cllr. O'Rourke's motion, the Town Clerk stated that Waterways Ireland have indicated that they could deploy their weed cutting barge in the run-up to the Triathlon, to cut weed growth within the canal bed, from the new Shannon Bridge to Talbot Avenue and the Council will assist with the leveling of this weed growth on its lands at the banks of the canal. Cllr. O'Rourke welcomed the response.

Councillors expenses online:

The Town Clerk stated that this is a matter for each individual Member and the Council will conform with the wishes of each insofar as the Council's website is concerned. Cllr. O'Rourke said he felt this information should be readily available in light of recent national scandals and Cllrs. Shaw and Buckley-Byrne agreed. Cllr. Cooney advised the Members to contact the Town Clerk directly in this matter.

Business Incentive Scheme:

In response to Cllr. Shaw's motion, the Town Clerk stated that the Council does not have a remit to aid individual business, but it does create opportunities, the environment and the infrastructure to enable business to flourish. He added that there is no statutory provision that enables a Council to grant a rates remission. Cllr. Shaw said that such a scheme is in operation by Kilkenny Borough Council and the Town Clerk agreed to contact them.

Signage for Little Theatre:

The Town Clerk informed Cllr. Shaw that signage for the Little Theatre will be examined as part of the signage plan for the town in the coming months. All the Members supported this motion.

Naming of New & Old Two Mile Roads:

The Town Clerk stated that a process will be initiated to change the names of these roads if the Members so wish and it was agreed to advertise inviting submissions from the residents.

Green areas on The Park:

The Town Clerk stated in response to Cllr. Moran's motion that these areas will be reinstated in the coming weeks.

Signage for St. Kieran's Community Centre:

In response to Cllr. McFadden's motion, the Town Clerk stated that the Council is not amenable to an advertising structure for this facility, but would consider a directional fingerpost sign that conforms with normal standards. Cllr. McFadden felt that the request for signage should be facilitated and Cllrs. Shaw and Moran agreed. The Town Clerk stated that the Community Centre involved should submit a proposal to the Council for consideration.

Fencing of railway line:

In response to Cllr. McFadden's request for an update she was informed that the Town Engineer had met with Iarnrod Eireann and it had been agreed that a 2.4m fence will be

erected on the Auburn Heights side of the railway line and it is hoped the work will have started by the end of June.

New litter bins:

The Town Clerk in response to Cllr. Buckley-Byrne's motion, stated that the area at the A.I.T. on the Dublin Road will be examined by Westmeath County Council in conjunction with the Tidy Town Group. Cllr. Buckley-Byrne expressed her thanks.

Lighting at the Community College:

The Town Clerk advised Cllr. Buckley-Byrne that the roads under the Council's control accessing the Community College are currently considered to be adequately lit and the areas she was speaking about, would be responsibility of the V.E.C.

Upgrading of Athlone Relief Road:

Cllr. Cooney requested that the Council ask the relevant Departments to carry out an assessment prior to the upgrading of the road to determine the noise impact on estates in close proximity, to ensure corrective measures are included in the upgrading. The Town Clerk advised that the matter will be referred to the National Roads Design Office of Westmeath County Council and they would be requested to give a presentation to the Members at the July Meeting.

This concluded the business of the meeting.