

Overwhelming support for County Council Budget

Waterford County Council's 2014 Budget won the overwhelming support of Councillors in Dungarvan on Thursday afternoon last (20-3), just hours before their colleagues in City Hall followed suit.

Michael Walsh, who attended both meetings in his new brief as overall Local Authority Manager, said that the overall goal for Waterford, as a single administrative entity was clear: progress.

And he believes that the budgets agreed last Thursday shall make such progress possible ahead of the official merger of both authorities following this May's Local Elections.

"The aim is to provide the same level of service for the people of Waterford," he said. "And I believe that this budget is a great starting point for bringing on Waterford in every aspect."

He added: "An increase in Commercial Rates is inevitable for all counties, but that thankfully shall not prove the case in Waterford for 2014."

The 2014 rate for Waterford shall be set at the Dungarvan rate, in effect, said Mr Walsh, representing a five per cent decrease for the county, a 20 per cent decrease for the city, while Dungarvan shall retain the 2013 rate.

A sum of €300,000 is to be provided in the budget specifically for Dungarvan's economic development "as recognition of its continuing importance as the main centre of economic activity in the county," said Mr Walsh.

Most Councillors welcomed this development, while others expressed fear that this may be raised again in the future.

Cllr James Tobin (Fianna Fáil) said that the five per cent reduction "was not good enough for small businesses who are already struggling in the current climate".

Mr Walsh replied, stating it was not a possible rates increase in the future was not his decision to make but he assured Councillors that he will not be recommending any such hike. However, he acknowledged that "within the revaluation process, there are winners and losers".

Fine Gael Cllr Nora Flynn said the rate struck illustrated that "a fairer system is now being carried out" while colleague Brendan Coffey added: "This decision will give Waterford a competitive advantage for business."

Regarding the transport budget, Cllr Michael J O' Ryan (Fianna Fáil) was wary about a decrease in local transport funding.

"In 2008, some €17 million was being spent - and that's now down to €9 million, a drop of 47 per cent," he said, "So I am naturally concerned that this funding is going to continue to decrease - I'm worried for rural Waterford; we were promised extra funding and not receiving it."

Mr Walsh said would like to spend more on roads but cited national fiscal policy when explaining the decrease.

While reservations about the merger remain in place among some Councillors in both the city and Dungarvan regarding what lies beyond this May's election, with Mr Walsh confirming that amalgamation costs ran to €3.1 million.

Reassuring Councillors, Michael Walsh said that funding shall be "distributed fairly between the existing authorities and that there is no need for concern in that respect".

The creation of Irish Water was a source of considerable debate in County Hall on Thursday last, with Cllr Pat Fitzgerald (Sinn Féin) querying "the privatisation of a €175 Council resource...I have to ask what benefit this is going to mean for the people of Waterford".

Cllr Fitzgerald, along with party colleague Brendan Mansfield and Cllr Tom Higgins (Independent) voted against the 2014 Budget, which was carried with considerable support, led by County Mayor Damien Geoghegan, who described the budget as "most progressive".

Meanwhile, the monies set aside to counter coastal erosion, coming to a total of €38,116, were deemed "insufficient for the county" by Cllrs Pat Nugent and John Carey (both Fine Gael) and Tom Cronin. Mr Walsh again cited that this funding had come from national level.

Meanwhile, Fine Gael MEP Sean Kelly hopes that the €1 billion EU Solidarity Fund can be accessed to help with the clean-up costs caused by Storm Christine.

"It is of critical importance that aid is directed swiftly to affected communities to ensure there is a quick reconstruction of the affected infrastructure," said Mr Kelly.

"Of particular note is the critical damage done to the infrastructure of smaller communities such as Tramore in County Waterford, Lahinch in County Clare, Foynes in County Limerick, Rossbeigh and Ballybunion in County Kerry amongst many other parts of Ireland.

"Bearing in mind extensive damage has also been done to cities such as Cork and Galway, including to critical flood defence infrastructure, the total bill for the recovery will stretch to hundreds of millions of euro and thus ensure that Ireland is eligible for the EU Solidarity Fund."