

Council's budget sees refuse collection privatised



Cllr Mary Roche: 'When people want to know who to blame, they may look no further than the people voting in this chamber tonight.'

Waiver scheme to be scrapped

WATERFORD City & County Councillors voted to accept the budget estimates for 2015 by 19 votes to 13 last week.

However, the meeting was dominated by discussion over the privatisation of the council's refuse collection service and the abolition of the waiver scheme.

Council CEO Michael Walsh outlined the budget, saying it was a positive budget which specifically focused on aspects such as economic development.

"I think we made a reasonable effort within the resources that were available," he said.

However, Mr Walsh added that most budgets came with some "negative elements" and went on to explain that he was proposing to discontinue the refuse collection service.

"I can assure you that I'm not recommending that lightly," he said.

"The situation is that we have a county collection but do not have it in the city. We are down to around 6,000 customers in the county out of around 24,000 households which represents about 25 per cent of customers."

Mr Walsh said that a capital investment in the context of a reduce customer base was difficult to sustain.

He also explained that regulatory issues were involved in the decision.

Stating that it was with regret he found himself in this difficult position, Mr Walsh said he had nothing but good to say of the service and appreciated the delivery of the service through the years.

He explained that staff would be redeployed internally, therefore avoiding job losses and thanked the customers who had stayed with service over the years.

In addition, Mr Walsh said that a "serious anomaly" existed in relation to the council's waiver scheme.

He explained that there were currently 4,600 people on the waiver scheme in Waterford City and said that it would be unfair if the scheme wasn't consistent across the city and county.

Rectifying this would result in "phenomenal cost from a council perspective" said Mr Walsh.

While investment in local roads was welcomed, there was strong opposition to the privations of the bin service and the abolition of the waiver scheme.

Independent Cllr Cha O'Neill said he would be voting against the budget, saying the abolition of the waiver scheme was one of the first kicks to the people of Waterford as a result of the amalgamation.

He said those currently availing of the waiver scheme could be paying a minimum of €300 to have their bins collected from

next January if the scheme was scrapped.

He said he couldn't understand why the council was advertising for people to join the council's service as recently as June.

Cllr O'Neill said it was not a decision for the Manager to make, but a decision for the elected councillors and criticised Fianna Fail councillors who he said marched against water charges but were willing to support the budget which would result in charges being imposed on the people they represent.

He said people simply wouldn't have money to put out their rubbish for collection and said the people currently availing of the waiver scheme were in dire straits as they weren't given out "willy-nilly".

"They'd nearly want to know what you had for your breakfast," said Cllr O'Neill.

Fianna Fail Cllr Jason Murphy said overall it was "a fair budget in difficult times".

While saying the loss of the waiver scheme was disappointing, he said he couldn't seem where the council could source €1.5 million to preserve the waiver and expand it to the county.

He said he believed the waiver issue was a matter for the Department of Social Protection and expressed his intention to raise a motion in relation to this at the next meeting.

Sinn Fein Cllr John Hearne said two of his party's "red line issues" were to maintain the bin services and to protect the waiver scheme for vulnerable people in society.

"Sinn Fein will never stand over hardship being heaped upon the most vulnerable," he said.

"People who paid €50 for their bins last year now have to come up with €300 for bins, €100 for the property tax, €260 for water. To go from paying €50 to €660 for services is obscene."

Independent Cllr Joe Kelly said the people living in rural County Waterford would be seriously affected by the privatisation of the bin collection service.

"While the council will serve whatever customers it has, there's no guarantee that a private provider will do the same. If they have to make long journeys up lanes or bad roads to two or three houses there isn't a financial return," he said.

He also raised questions about the level of recycling carried out by private operators and the consideration given to the environment.

Fine Gael Cllr John Cummins criticised those who were opposing the budget.

He said it was the primary duty of councillors to adopt a budget.

"I've heard many opposition members giving out and complaining and crying foul over certain measures, but it is the prerogative of any councillor to put forward an alternative budget," he said.

"I don't expect there will be an alternative proposal because opposition councillors by their nature don't want to show what services they would cut to provide for the measures they want."

He said it was easy to be populous and complain, but it "took backbone to support the budget as proposed".

Fellow Fine Gael Cllrs Damien Geoghegan and John Carey were also critical of those opposing the budget.

Independent Cllr Mary Roche said she couldn't vote to support a budget which put "another regressive tax" on people.

Saying she refused to go along with the herd, she queried if some of the councillors understood the budgetary process based on comments they had made.

"I heard one councillor say it's an executive decision, it is not. It is a reserved function. I heard one councillor say this decision was made a year ago, it was not. It is being made tonight," she said.

"When people want to know who to blame for the abolition of the waivers in the city and the abolition of the service in the county, they may look no further than the people voting in this chamber tonight. You are the people making the decision, not the manager and not the executive. They are recommending the budget, but it is wholly a decision for this council."

Independent Cllr Davy Daniels said he had received a number of phone calls from concerned people in relation to the proposed cuts.

He outlined an alternative measure to bring about the saving required in the budget, however this was deemed to be invalid by CEO Michael Walsh.

Fianna Fail Cllr Eamon Quinlan

"I'm quite dismayed at the stance taken by some councillors," he said.

He asked if they had the "energy, inclination or ability" to propose a mathematical alternative and said their criticism was "faint hearted".

Nineteen councillors voted to adopt the budget: Fine Gael Cllrs Seanie Power, Liam Brazil, John Cummins, Damien Geoghegan, Lola O'Sullivan, John Carey, Declan Doocey, Pat Nugent; Independent Cllr Joe Conway; Fianna Fail Cllrs M J O'Ryan, Mary Butler, John O'Leary, Eddie Mulligan, Jason Murphy, Adam Wyse, Tom Cronin, James Tobin, Eamon Quinlan; Labour Cllr John Pratt.

Thirteen councillors voted against the budget: Sinn Fein Cllrs Pat Fitzgerald, Siobhan Whelan, John Hearne, Breda Brennan, Jim Griffin, Declan Clune; Independent Cllrs Davy Daniels, Cha O'Neill, Mary Roche, Blaise Hannigan, Joe Kelly, Sean Reinhardt, Seamus O'Donnell.