

Minutes of Strategic Policy Committee 4
Environmental Protection, Climate Action & Energy
Held on 22nd November 2023 at 9.00 am
Council Chambers/Hybrid

In the Chair: Cllr. Joe Lyons

In Attendance: Cllr Deirdre Cullen, Cllr. Mary Hilda Cavanagh, Cllr. Maria Dollard, Cllr David Fitzgerald, Mr James Murphy, Mr. John Hurley, Ms. Mary Rice

Also Present: Mr. Sean McKeown, Director of Service; Mr. Michael Arthurs, Senior Executive Officer; Ms Dearbhala Ledwidge, Climate Action Officer, Ms. Margaret Whelan, Environmental Awareness Officer, Ms. Deirdre Trait

There were no apologies.

Item 1 Declaration of interests

None reported.

Item 2 Confirmation of Minutes

Proposed by Cllr. Mary Hilda Cavanagh, seconded by Cllr. Maria Dollard and agreed: *“the minutes of SPC4 meeting held on the 18th July 2023, are hereby adopted,”*.

Item 3 Matters Arising

Condolences were extended to Mr. John Hurley on the death of his father.

Item 4 EPA Local Authority Environmental Enforcement Performance Report

Sean McKeown updated the committee on the performance report and the EPA Audit held on 19th September last.

He acknowledged that overall, the results in respect of Kilkenny County Council’s performance in 2022 were disappointing and not acceptable. He said the Council are taking the findings seriously. He said the under-performance is largely due to the fact that a number of staff in critical positions left the Environment Section during 2022 and it has proved difficult to replace them in the current competitive employee market. He wished to state that the nature of the work undertaken by Environment staff is that they have to prioritise complaints and this is not fully reflected in the report. He said the report is not all negative. It did acknowledge the excellent governance structures in place in the Council in terms of our ambitious targets; our review and reporting and complaints handling. He said he did not want the Report to define the work of the Environment Section as a lot of the good work undertaken by Environment staff is not measured by the EPA and therefore is not included in the report, including Control of Horses and the Animal Welfare Committee, Tidy Towns, anti-dumping initiative works, court cases progressed and environmental awareness work.

Michael Arthurs also addressed the issues raised in the report and the EPA Audit.

Michael gave a presentation to the committee outlining the results in the report. Michael re-iterated that the results do not reflect the full extent of work that is happening on the ground. The results for Kilkenny and 3 other neighbouring counties attracted national media attention. Kilkenny County Council are committed to addressing non-compliances in the RMCEI and staff recruitment is underway. It is imperative that relevant qualified and competent staff are employed.

Cllr Joe Lyons thanked Michael for his presentation. He acknowledged the hard work of Environment staff and noted his disappointment that a lot of the work done is not measured in the audit.

Many contributions and queries were received from Cllr Mary Hilda Cavanagh, James Murphy, Cllr. Deirdre Cullen, Cllr. Maria Dollard and Cllr. David Fitzgerald, which may be summarised as follows:

- The EPA report is very sobering;
- Should Local Authorities be involved in farm inspections at all?;
- Environment staff are 100% responsive;
- There is a need for more air quality monitors;
- Team Up to Clean Up Event does not add value;
- Kilkenny County Council suffers reputational damage as a result of the report;
- Water quality deterioration is a critical issue for the country;
- Changes to septic grants need to be well publicised;
- Data in EPA Water Quality Reports are not up to date

Michael Arthurs and Sean McKeown addressed all queries raised.

Item 5

- **Climate Action Plan**
- **Community Climate Action Fund**
- **DZ Programme**

Dearbhala Ledwidge gave a detailed presentation on the Draft Kilkenny County Council Climate Action Plan 2024-2029. It is a statutory requirement and open for public consultation now on Consult.ie. Dearbhala advised it is a very ambitious and challenging plan with all service areas involved. She also played a short video for the committee about Kilkenny Co. Co's Climate Action called 'Kilkenny Going Green' produced by the Climate Action Team.

Cllr Joe Lyons thanked Dearbhala for her presentation and commented that it was good to see a great response from communities.

Gratitude was extended to the Climate Action Team from the Committee and contributions were received from James Murphy and Cllr. Maria Dollard, which may be summarised as follows:

- Debris such as fallen trees in rivers is contributing to flooding incidents;
- Landowners should be allowed cut back hedgerows during the closed period to facilitate the increase in cycling on local roads;
- Kilkenny is a farming county;
- Tarmacadam around tress on Castle Road;
- Need to assess operational decisions to ensure they are aligned with Climate Action Plan.

Dearbhala addressed queries raised.

Item 6

- **Litter Management Plan**

Mags Whelan gave an informative presentation on the Draft Litter Management Plan 2024-2026. Mags outlined some new objectives and amendments to the existing plan that she is proposing to include in the draft plan. It will be open for public consultation shortly.

Cllr. Joe Lyons thanked Mags for her presentation.

Item 7

- **Progress Report by Director of Services**

It was noted that the Director of Services progress report was circulated to all members prior to the meeting. Sean McKeown gave a summary of the report.

Item 8**Any other business**

Ms. Mary Rice queried the type of trees installed on the Parade as part of Yulefest and Sean McKeown addressed these queries.

James Murphy stated there needs to be assistance provided to landowners to address the increasing problem of Ash Dieback disease on local roads.

Cllr. Joe Lyons concluded the meeting and thanked all members for their attendance.