

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS AT ONLINE SPECIAL MEETING OF LIMERICK CITY AND COUNTY COUNCIL HELD ON FRIDAY, 26TH MARCH, 2021, AT 2PM.

PRESENT IN THE CHAIR:

Councillor M. Collins, Mayor.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Councillors Butler, Carey, Collins (B), Collins (J), Costelloe, Daly, Donegan, Foley, Galvin, Hartigan, Keary, Kiely, Kilcoyne, Leddin, McSweeney, Mitchell, Murphy, Novak Uí Chonchúir, O'Brien, O'Dea, O'Donoghue, O'Hanlon, O'Sullivan, Ruddle, Ryan (E), Ryan (M), Scanlan, Secas, Sheahan (J), Sheahan (K), Sheahan (M), Sheehan (C), Slattery, Talukder, Teefy, Teskey.

OFFICIALS IN ATTENDANCE:

Chief Executive (Mr. P. Daly), Deputy Chief Executive and Director, Support Services (Mr S. Coughlan), Director, Community Development (Mr. G. Daly), A/Director, Capital Investment (Mr. S. Hanrahan), A/Director, Economic Development (Mr. V. Murray), Meetings Administrator (Mr. J. Clune), A/Administrative Officer, Corporate Services and Governance (Mr. P. Williams).

At the outset it was noted that, owing to ICT issues and with the agreement of the Mayor, the Special Meeting had been deferred from its original date of Monday, 15th March, to Friday, 26th March.

The Mayor commenced the Meeting by welcoming the Members and members of the press who were present. He stated that the Special Meeting had been convened to discuss the issue as set out in the Special Meeting Requisition received on 10th March, 2021, and signed by a number of Members as follows:

“That, Limerick City and County Council call on the Minister for Finance to request Bank of Ireland to defer the proposed closure of its bank branches in Limerick pending a full impact assessment of such a decision on the economy locally.”

Signed: Councillors J. Scanlan, B. Teefy, E. Ryan, E. O'Brien, P.J. Carey, F. Daly, J. O'Donoghue

The Mayor lent his full support to the Motion and agreed with the need to hold a Special Meeting given the importance of the subject matter for the towns and villages affected by the proposed Bank of Ireland branch closures.

Councillor Scanlan, in proposing the Motion on behalf of the Independents Group who signed the Requisition calling for a Special Meeting, emphasised that Bank of Ireland's decision was contrary to its Mission Statement which committed to making a positive contribution to businesses and communities where the Bank operated; and that the proposed action would

further reduce the quality of service which was essential to meet its customers' needs in Limerick.

He also said that the Bank, in attempting to justify reduced footfall at its outlets nationally to support this decision, was using the current COVID-19 pandemic restrictions to further disadvantage rural and hard-to-reach communities; and that deciding to reduce Rural Limerick branches by 66% was disproportionate to that earmarked for elsewhere in the country, and was likely to seriously disadvantage local economies.

He further went on to say that, by proposing that branches at Newcastle West and Kilmallock could meet the needs of Bank of Ireland's customers, the Bank was reneging on its duty to provide an adequate service to its Limerick base; and that the Business, Community and Farming Interests needed a viable, easy-to-reach and working banking sector to prosper and thrive at local level.

Councillor Scanlan concluded by stating that the closures, as earmarked, were wholly unacceptable to those he represented and he requested that this decision be reconsidered. He also requested the Executive to consider setting up a Working Group to examine how the Credit Union movement could become better placed to service communities, and to evaluate the merits of a Public Banking System operating on similar lines to Continental models. He requested that the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform would also be included when writing to the Minister for Finance in regard to the Motion. Councillor Teefy seconded this proposal.

Councillor Teefy, in seconding the Motion, said that it was very disappointing to learn that Bank of Ireland was closing so many branches in Limerick, and that it was a hammer blow to rural Ireland. She said that, in Limerick, there were seven branch closures which was one of the largest number of closures in the country and, with Bruff's Bank of Ireland branch due to close, the South and East of Limerick would then only have one Bank of Ireland branch left - in Kilmallock. She added that the bank closures would be a huge loss to rural dwellers, many of whom did not have internet banking; and that no prior notice of this decision was given to Bank of Ireland customers - many of whom had been customers of the Bank for generations. She made the point that the timing to announce these closures was inappropriate - with the country going through a pandemic and so many people stressed and under pressure. She concluded by saying that it was not known if there would be ATMs at the locations where the branches were closing and it was critical that the ATMs at least be left in situ; she also asked that the closures be deferred until further research could be carried out when the country opened up post-COVID-19.

There was near unanimous support from the Members for the Motion put forward to the Special Meeting. The Members then spoke in turn and the following additional points were made by them in the ensuing discussion:

- Many elderly members of communities where branches were closing did not have internet banking and so would be forced to make long commutes to a Bank of Ireland branch.

- The public wanted the personal touch at their banks and did not wish to have to do all their banking on the phone or on the Internet.
- The local economies of the towns where there was to be a branch closure would suffer greatly as people from surrounding areas and villages often travelled to these towns for their banking and, by extension, supported the economies of these towns by doing some other business in the town as part of their bank visit. The towns with a Bank of Ireland branch remaining would benefit but the economies of Abbeyfeale, Askeaton, Bruff and Rathkeale would suffer greatly with the proposed bank branch closures. There was a risk that some smaller businesses might have to close due to the decrease in knock-on business/footfall that they received from being close to the bank.
- A bank was a central organ in any town. Voluntary groups, clubs, businesses and local events had ties to a local bank branch. Towns losing their Bank of Ireland bank branch meant the ending of the commercial relationship between local business and the local bank. These towns were effectively being downgraded and the face of the town changed as a consequence. History also suggested that when a town lost its bank branch, that branch would not return.
- The Government and, by extension, the taxpayer, bailed out the banks in the post-2008 Irish banking crisis but now this goodwill was not being returned; the taxpayer was not being considered now even though it was the taxpayer who had kept the banks afloat post-2008.
- With the employment/salaries in these branches moving elsewhere by way of job transfer, it was a further economic blow to the towns where the branches were proposed to close.
- Credit Unions and the local Post Offices could only do so much to fill the void in towns where branches were closing. It was also critical that the ATMs of the Bank of Ireland branches that were proposed to close would remain in situ.
- If there was only one other pillar bank in a town where Bank of Ireland was closing a branch, it was not good for the consumer as the other bank would have a monopoly in the town and would have no reason to reduce rates without competition in the town.
- The proposed bank branch closures affected the city customers too; the closure of the UL Bank of Ireland branch meant students, including foreign students, would not have a local bank. The elderly customers of the Roxboro and Caherdavin branches would also be affected - many of whom did not have access to Internet banking.
- In the United Kingdom, 12 months' notice was given if a local bank branch was going to be closed. This had not been replicated in Ireland; not enough notice had been given.

The Chief Executive also lent his support to the Motion and agreed to explore the options that the Executive had to support the towns and villages affected by the proposed branch closures.

The Motion for the Special Meeting, proposed by Councillor Scanlan and seconded by Councillor Teefy, was adopted.

Councillor Sheahan (K) stated that he wished to abstain.

This concluded the Meeting.

Signed: _____
Mayor

Date: _____