

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS AT SPECIAL MEETING OF LIMERICK CITY AND COUNTY COUNCIL HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DOORADOYLE, AND ONLINE, ON TUESDAY, 29TH OCTOBER, 2024, AT 4.00 P.M.

PRESENT IN THE CHAIR: Príomh Chomhairleoir Councillor D. McSweeney

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Mayor Moran;

Councillors Beasley, Benson, Butler, Carey, Collins (B), Collins (M), Conway, Daly, Donoghue, Doyle, Foley, Galvin, Gavan, Hartigan (S), Hartigan (T), Hickey-O'Mara, Keary, Kiely, Kilcoyne, Leddin, O'Donoghue, O'Donovan, O'Hanlon, O'Sullivan (O), O'Sullivan (T), Pond, Ruddle, Ryan (E), Ryan (M), Scanlan, Secas, Sheahan (J), Sheehan (C), Slattery, Stokes, Talukder, Teefy, Teskey, Ward.

OFFICIALS IN ATTENDANCE:

Director General (P. Daly), Deputy Director General & Director, Economic Development, Enterprise & Tourism (G. Daly); A/Director, Support Services (Mr. J. Clune), Director, Housing (Ms. C. Curley), Director, Regeneration, Sports and Recreation (Mr. J. Delaney), Director, Rural, Community and Culture Development (Mr. S. Duclot), Director, Transportation and Mobility (Mr. B. Kennedy), Director Environment, Climate Action & Shared Services, (Mr. K. Lehané), Director, Planning and Place-Making (Mr. V. Murray), Meetings Administrator (Ms. C. Farrell), Administrative Officer (Mr. M. Leahy), Senior Staff Officer (Ms. A. Foley), Financial Accountant (Mr. P. Murnane), Management Accountant (Ms. I. Griffin).

The Príomh Chomhairleoir adjourned the start of the Special Meeting for 15 minutes so as to allow for the arrival of the Mayor who was coming from another Meeting.

On resumption, the Príomh Chomhairleoir welcomed everyone to the Special Meeting which was convened following a request from Cllrs Butler, McSweeney, Kiely, Doyle, and O'Sullivan to discuss the International Rugby Experience.

Cllr Butler thanked the Príomh Chomhairleoir for agreeing to call this Special Meeting to discuss the International Rugby Experience. He referred to the Workshop that was held for Members in relation to same on Wednesday 23rd October, where a briefing update was provided to the Members on the proposal to gift the International Rugby Experience to Limerick City & County Council.

He noted that the only briefing received was on the 23rd October. Since the Workshop took place, an announcement had been made that the International Rugby Experience was to close. In a subsequent press release issued by the Council, reference was only made to Elected Members so the suggestion was that the Elected Members were to blame for the closure, which he believed was very unfair on Members. He stated that both Council Management

and the Mayor had a role to play in the process and he believed it was unfair that the Elected Members were being blamed for the closure. There was also some confusion as to what information was given to the Elected Members at the Workshop, and he asked if the presentation being provided this morning was the same as the presentation given at last week's Workshop and what had been discussed with representatives of the International Rugby Experience.

The Director General expressed his disappointment at the announcement of the closure of the International Rugby Experience. He stated that every effort was being made to secure the proposed transfer of the International Rugby Experience into Discover Limerick DAC, which was the Council owned Tourism Company that manages other Limerick attractions including King John's Castle, Lough Gur, etc.

He outlined to the Members that, following extensive due diligence, that a detailed briefing was provided to the Members last week, to discuss the proposed transition. He confirmed that all possible avenues were explored, including a report from an independent tourism expert consultant. Despite the best efforts of all involved, the Council were unable to secure the operational and capital funding which would be required from the Council into the future.

The Deputy Director General confirmed that Paul Ryan from Shannon International Development Consultants would be doing today's presentation as his colleague John Ruddle, who had done last week's presentation, was not available.

Mr Ryan then proceeded to give the presentation to the Special Meeting where he outlined the Background; Work Programme; Baseline Position; Options and Recommendations involved following the initial proposal to transfer the International Rugby Experience to Limerick City & County Council/Discover Limerick DAC.

He outlined that the building was a high value gift from the McManus Family to Limerick City and that the asset was a high profile building in the centre of the City which was a world standard attraction and built to the highest standards. It had achieved a significant economic impact in a very short time with circa 31,000 visitors and €5.2 million to the local economy in 2024, and had a motivated self-directed team already in place.

For the future, the proposal was that the International Rugby Experience was to remain as a rugby attraction until the end of 2027, with the possibility of the building being repurposed after 2027 to a possible alternative attraction or alternative use as a civic building.

He outlined the legal and technical issues that needed to be addressed as part of any transfer including the Transfer of Undertakings (TUPE) requirements in relation to staff, along with potential VAT implications for future civic use or any change of use too, including change of charitable status.

The International Rugby Experience was very early in its life cycle and there was room to grow the attraction in terms of visitors and revenue. However, it was estimated that the projected breakeven figure was 70,000- 80,000 visitors p.a. which was not currently being

achieved, and that the IRE will require direct operating financial subvention in the short to medium term at least.

He proceeded to outline the 3 possible options to be considered:

1. The International Rugby Experience transfers fully into Discover Limerick DAC, and a full range of interventions are taken on board over the initial months and years to improve the financial operating position;
2. The International Rugby Experience transfers fully into Discover Limerick DAC, and it is operated as the International Rugby Experience for the initial years with a process starting in 2025 to re-imagine the experience into a new visitor attraction for Limerick;
3. The International Rugby Experience transfers fully into Discover Limerick DAC, and it is operated as the International Rugby Experience for the Initial years with a process starting in year 3 (2027) to re-imagine the Property into a new civic use for Limerick, benefiting the City.

He then outlined the projected cost implications involved with the three options that were outlined.

The Elected Members thanked Mr Ryan for his presentation and noted the details of same and the possible options open to the Council. They thanked the McManus family for the very generous offer of the building to the city, and noted all the philanthropic work that both JP McManus and his family had done for Limerick over the years.

The Members expressed their disappointment at the proposed closure and the loss to Limerick and the city centre, and also the impact on those who could lose their jobs as a result. They agreed that the building was iconic and a huge addition to Limerick City Centre, and that it was important to do as much as possible to try and prevent its closure.

The Elected Members criticised the fact that the process had been underway for 12 months and that it took so long to brief the Members on same. They highlighted that the overall communication to Members was poor and their surprise when the announcement was made that the International Rugby Experience was to close. They also expressed their disappointment with the wording of the press release issued by the Council following the closure announcement, which did not refer to the role of Management or the Mayor in the process.

They asked that full clarity be provided in relation to the costings and figures provided and whether an application had been made to the Government for funding support to assist with the attraction being kept open. They noted that it would be a big ask on Council Finances to fully support the transfer and the likely implications for other basic services provided by the local authority. They also asked as to when the Mayor was made aware of the issues in relation to the proposed transfer and what he had done subsequently to address the issue.

The Director General confirmed that it was not intended to disrespect the Members in the press release which, he stated, had been issued following the unexpected announcement of the closure of the International Rugby Experience, and he regretted if this was the impression created following the issuing of the press release. He confirmed that Management had always worked in good faith on this process and in the best interests of Limerick, the Members and the local authority.

He outlined the process involved in transferring a building like the International Rugby Experience and that it was very complex and challenging. He cited the example of King John's Castle which took 18 months to transfer into the Limerick Tourism DAC and the Adare Heritage Centre which took 16 months.

Such transfers were always challenging and doing a similar transfer in a 12 month timeframe was not realistic. It was especially challenging where the International Rugby Experience is loss making and the challenge is to try and pivot to something else in order to make it viable in the longer term.

He also confirmed that a funding application had been submitted to Government in relation to possible support to aid with the takeover of the International Rugby Experience. He also stated that work would continue on the process to try and identify solutions with representatives of the International Rugby Experience, in an effort to seek a resolution for all involved and for Limerick.

The Deputy Director General confirmed that today's presentation was similar, with some additional clarification on figures provided for clarity and information purposes and that there were no other changes to the presentation previously given to the Members. He confirmed that the presentation would be circulated to the Members and that the details of correspondence between Limerick City & County Council and the International Rugby Experience would be made available too.

Mayor Moran confirmed that the issue was first raised with him following his election in June and that he had agreed with the proposal for an independent consultant to review the likely cost implications for the local authority.

He noted that there wasn't surplus funding available in the allocated Mayoral fund of €40 million that could be used to fund this, especially with the proposals for Limerick and its future development as outlined in his Mayoral Programme. He also had concerns about the stipulation that the International Rugby Experience building can never be sold by the Council, which would establish it as a possible lifelong liability for the local authority.

Mayor Moran also acknowledged the generous proposed €1.2 million donation by the McManus family, and he proposed allocating an additional €100,000 per annum to this donation for 3 years, so as to keep the International Rugby Experience open until 2027. This would also allow time for the issues identified to be further worked through in conjunction with the representatives of the International Rugby Experience.

It was agreed that this proposal would be communicated to the representatives of the International Rugby Experience and that an invitation be issued to Barry Hannon, CEO of the

International Rugby Experience to attend a meeting with the Elected Members to further discuss and work towards a possible solution agreeable to all.

This concluded the Meeting.

Signed:

Príomh Chomhairleoir