

Minutes of the Special Meeting of Municipal District of Baltinglass held in the Civic Offices, Blessington on 15th Nov 2019, at 10.30 a.m.

Present: Cathaoirleach Gerry O'Neill
Councillor Edward Timmins
Councillor Patsy Glennon
Councillor Avril Cronin
Councillor Vincent Blake
Councillor John Mullen

In Attendance: Mr. Sean Quirke, District Manager
Mr. Dermot Graham, A/Senior Executive Engineer
Mr. Pat Byrne, Executive Engineer
Mr. Garvan Hickey, District Administrator
Ms. Andrea Connolly, A/Assistant Staff Officer
Deputy Pat Casey, TD
Deputy John Brady, TD

1. To discuss the current condition of the N81 and the need to upgrade the 31 kilometres of the road

The Cathaoirleach, Councillor Gerry O'Neill, opened the special meeting by welcoming all present. He conveyed apologies from Deputy Andrew Doyle and Deputy Stephen Donnelly who could not attend due to prior commitments and noted that there was no communication from Deputy Simon Harris. Cllr. O'Neill informed members that the reason for the special meeting was to discuss the issues over the lack of development on the N81. He advised that the 31km stretch of road from Tallaght to Hollywood includes a stretch of 300m either side of the preferred route for the upgrade works which is frozen and no developments of this land can occur until a decision on an upgrade is made. Transport Infrastructure Ireland have indicated that the preferred route at the moment may not be the agreed work when the

development of the road finally goes ahead, this won't be examined until 2027. He also noted that over eighty people have been killed on the N81 including a family member of Cllr. Glennon's, The reason for this meeting was to get local councillors and TD's views on what could be done and to also give the public an opportunity to have their say.

Cllr. Timmins raised concerns over the lack of consultation with local councillors from Transport Infrastructure Ireland and the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Shane Ross, on recent works on N81 and the high cost involved. He noted that structural works and skid resistance works were necessary on the N81 but that widening works were required and would possibly have made better use of funds. He advised members that new strategy and approach was needed by Wicklow County Council and members to get work done on the N81. Until the major upgrade works would take place it was necessary to look at other options such as pull in areas for trucks and tractors which would reduce improve the flow of traffic and reduce the risks been taken by road users, traffic management at Hollywood cross. He also noted that the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy is in place until 2030 but there may be a mid-term review in 2023. Cllr. Timmins also stressed the importance of lobbying to get the upgrade of the N81 back on the plan and noted that political will at all levels is needed to do this. According to the statistics the N81 is the longest stretch of dangerous road. Cllr. Timmins outlined that there was a genuine frustration at what little has been done to date and despite the N81 not being included in national plans things should not be left at a standstill. TII and the Department of Transport should enable the County Council to go to CPO stage and purchase whatever land was required to upgrade the N81. This would avoid the situation of only starting the CPO in 2027 and another eight years would have gone by.

Cllr. Mullen welcomed this meeting and noted that the N81 is well gritted during the icy conditions but that the N81 has been neglected especially with regard to safety on the road. He added that the N81 and N11 need to be treated equally and the Minister for Transport is the person who can change this but there is a need engage with him and need for a public display of support. Cllr. Mullen noted that the N81 and the N11 are used equally by people in County Wicklow and surrounding counties but are not treated equally. The delay in upgrading the N81 and putting off until 2027 was hampering economic development in the area and safety issues need to be dealt with.

Cllr. Blake concurred with both Cllr. Timmins and Cllr. Mullen and noted that this issue has arisen at every meeting over the last five to six years. He advised members that he had met with the Minister and officials in 2017 and it was difficult and frank meeting. He also noted that financing the upgrade of the N81 was a big issue at the time it was estimated that it would cost in the region of €200 million. Cllr. Blake added that he welcomed the improvement and safety works that are ongoing on the N81 but there is a need to shout louder to get this back on the agenda. He noted that land had been sterilised and taken out of development, leading to uncertainty for the owners of the land and the preferred route may not use this land. Cllr. Blake outlined that the N81 needs to be included in national plans and strategies or it will continue to be moved down the priority list as new issues arise.

Cllr. Cronin noted that it was important to discuss the N81 and that as a commuter herself it was disheartening to see that no development on the N81 had taken place since 2007. Cllr. Cronin raised concerns over the safety issues on the N81 and the number of accidents that occur. She stressed that there was a need for all to work together to get this upgrade back on the plan along with elected members in the Dáil. Cllr. Cronin noted that the safety and improvement works which had taken place were only putting a sticky plaster over issue. Cllr. Cronin also noted that Minister Ross does not seem to be aware of the issues on the N81 and the full implications of these issues.

Cllr. Glennon thanked the two TD's present for attending this Special Meeting of Baltinglass Municipal District and acknowledged apologies from those that could not attend. He then reflected on all the lives that have been lost on this stretch of the N81, including a member of his own family, and the impact and devastation it has on the families of those lost. He added that these deaths could have been avoided and advised that one of the reasons he became involved in politics was to get the N81 upgraded and improved. He pleaded for help on getting this done and acknowledged the hard work of Cllr. Timmins and Cllr. Blake on keeping this issue to the forefront. He also noted that progress was being made with the ongoing works on the bus stop at Hollywood Cross and thanked Pat Byrne, Sean Quirke, Colm Lavery and the staff of Wicklow County Council for all their help in trying to progress this. Cllr. Glennon also noted that the N81 is a serious piece of infrastructure and needs to be treated accordingly all the Deputies and the members should focus on getting the necessary works completed. There will be no industrial commitment in the area until the necessary

infrastructure the N81 is in place, this is limiting development in the area and contributing to the number of cars on the road.

Deputy Pat Casey thanked all for organising the meeting and noted that Cllr. Glennon's contribution reflected the impact of the lives lost on the N81 on their families and the wider community. The safety issues on the road need to be prioritised and noted that the N81 is the last single carriage way into development. Deputy Casey also outlined the impact the lack of upgrade on the N81 is having on the economic and tourism development in the area. He added that without the upgrade, development in West Wicklow will not progress and stressed the need to deliver this upgrade as soon as possible. He advised members that he had previously met with the Minister and Transport Infrastructure Ireland on two occasions and had raised the issue of agreeing on a design for an upgrade and on the compulsory purchase orders of land. He added that in 2018 the National Planning Framework was adopted and finalisation of the NPF alongside the ten-year National Development Plan will put together one plan to guide strategic development and infrastructure investment at national level. He went on to explain that the upgrade of the N81 is excluded because it is not part of the ten-year National Development Plan and this is a massive oversight. He added that political will is needed and that he will do whatever he can to help get the N81 included in the national capital plan.

Deputy John Brady stressed the importance of keeping this issue on the agenda and advised that a few weeks ago he had raised the issue of the N81 upgrade in Leinster House with the Taoiseach, who was not familiar with this scheme but advised Deputy Brady that he would take a look at. He added that with two Ministers living in county Wicklow this should be a priority. He also noted the economic loss to the area and the traffic congestion in Blessington town. Deputy Brady voiced his disappointment that the upgrade of the N81 was dropped from the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy and stressed the need to get it back into the strategy. He informed members that a review is due in 2023 but there can be no delay and there is a need to put pressure on with the support of the five TD's. At the moment the N81 is not a priority for the government and not a priority for the TII. Political pressure is needed to make it a priority. Blessington area is to cater for over three hundred additional houses and the road infrastructure is not in place. Deputy Brady informed members that he would

support the CPO of the sterilised land to be advanced and this would demonstrate a commitment from the TII.

Both Deputy Brady and Deputy Casey outlined their commitment to working with Baltinglass Municipal District to bring political pressure to get the N81 on the agenda and included in strategic plans. There is a need to push it at all levels to ensure that it is prioritised.

The District Manager, Sean Quirke, advised members that since the selection of the agreed route from Tallaght to Hollywood there had been little work in relation to the Tallaght to Hollywood scheme. Various small projects had been undertaken to improve road safety and the Knockroe project was currently underway. The exclusion of the N81 from the Eastern Midland Regional Assembly Spatial and Economic Strategy was regrettable. It was also not included in the National Capital plan and this made it very difficult to get the necessary funding for the improvement and upgrading works. Unless it is included in a plan there will not be any funding available for the upgrade and TII will not make a commitment unless it can be funded. Mr. Quirke noted that members had mentioned looking for EMRA to include the N81 upgrade as a variation in the Spatial and Economic Strategy but noted that was unlikely to happen as the strategy had only recently been adopted. Mr. Quirke also the improvement works that were ongoing on the N81 and stressed the importance of pushing for the upgrade of the Inner Relief Road in Blessington and getting the possibility of getting work done at the junction of N81 and Oak Drive.

The Cathaoirleach, Cllr. O'Neill, noted that the community of Blessington is in limbo with the freeze of 300mts of land on N81 and the Town Development Plan is also affected by this freeze and deemed this as unacceptable. He welcomed plans for the development of 360 houses in Blessington and the ongoing development of houses in Baltinglass but raised concerns over the lack of development of infrastructure to support these. The upgrade of the N81 not only affects Wicklow but also South Dublin, Kildare and Carlow, need to get them on side. A lot of work had gone into getting the agreed route but lack of funding meant it had not moved any further. All members are getting a lot of representation from the public regarding the condition of the N81

A suspension of standing orders was proposed by Cllr. Timmins and seconded by Cllr. Glennon to facilitate contributions from members of the public.

Mr. Richard Burke from Hollywood raised a number of concerns from Hollywood residents, these included:

- the need for an extension of the footpath from Hollywood village to the N81. Tidy Towns completed a traffic survey on the 27th July and recorded 850 vehicles going through the village. Mr Burke noted that this road is very dangerous for pedestrians due to the high volumes of traffic. Looking for a foot path similar to the one from the Woodenbridge to Avoca.
- the bus route from Tullow to Dublin runs four times daily and only sometimes stops in Hollywood as at present there is no bus stop. The facilities are there but need space for the bus to be able to pull in. There are plans for a bus shelter but a bus stop sign is required.
- Speed limit signs on approach to Hollywood cross are required to reduce the speed of the traffic which is continuous from early morning.

Cllr. O'Neill thanked Mr. Burke for his views and advised that these issues would be addressed within the next few weeks.

Mr. John Kavanagh from Lisheen Springs Golf Club raised concerns over the proposed preferred routing of the N81 to go through land on the Golf Club. He stressed that a meeting was required in order to discuss the issue of replacing this land, it takes seven years to bring the land up to the required standard. At the moment they are in limbo as not sure if the scheme is going to proceed or going to be revised. Cllr. O'Neill thanked Mr. Kavanagh for raising this point and advised members that over 100 holdings require a CPO for the N81 upgrade and at present all are in limbo and there is a need for clarification on this. Cllr. Timmins agreed with Cllr. O'Neill and noted that property along this area of N81 have been devalued due to the freezing of this land.

Ms. Alison Fairbanks questioned the roadworks on the N81 and why they are taking so long to complete. She also expressed concerns over the lack of lighting at night and lack of road markings making it very difficult for motorists to negotiate safely. Ms. Fairbanks also

outlined that it was necessary for everyone to work together and that this was not a political issue. Cllr. O'Neill outlined that the TII are responsible for the N81 overseeing these works in partnership with the roads section and that hopefully they would be completed within a week.

Ms. Anne Halpin from the Hollywood Forum raised concerns over the lack of feedback getting to local groups. She noted how important it was to give information on a broader scale to communities and keep them informed of what is going on in local area. Members of the public believe the Council is holding up projects such as the N81 and do not know that is the government that are holding up projects and dictate where the money is spent. Ms. Halpin also expressed her fear that the funding allocated to Hollywood under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme for the footpath would be lost as it has to be spent by December.

Mr. Oliver Cooney from Blessington raised concerns over the lack of cycling tracks in Blessington area and the dangers experienced by cyclists in the area. Cllr. O'Neill noted that this issue has been raised previously would require addressing. Another issue raised by a member of the public present was the issue of heavy haulage trucks exiting from the various quarries along the N81. She questioned if there was a law in place that required these trucks go through a wash before exiting on to the N81 as they were leaving a residue of grime on the N81 and road markings were indistinguishable at times. Cllr. O'Neill noted that this was an issue and was a particular problem around Blessington due to the number of quarries.

Mr. Shay Cunningham, a member of the Blessington cycling club, questioned if an underpass or overpass was ever considered for cattle crossing the N81. Mr. Pat Byrne, Executive Engineer, explained that a cattle underpass had been considered but the land on other side of N81 is not the property of the cattle owner and no agreement was in place with these landowners.

Cllr. O'Neill thanked all members of the public for attending meeting and for sharing their concerns and views on the N81. He added that the monthly Baltinglass Municipal District meeting was due to be held on Monday morning and all issues would be further discussed then and reviewed. Cllr. Cronin stressed the importance of deciding on the next step before meeting concluded and informed members that Deputy Doyle was fully supportive of the upgrading of the N81.

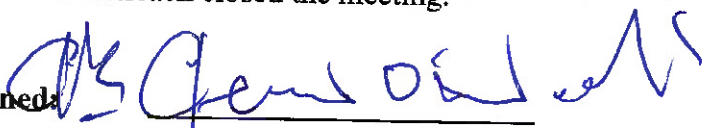
Deputy John Brady noted there were some very useful points made at meeting and suggested a Municipal District meeting be held on a more regular basis with TD's present and in order to keep up to date with progress on this issue. Deputy Brady also suggested requesting for Minister for Transport to meet with the five TD's and members of the Baltinglass Municipal District. Cllr. O'Neill suggested Mr. Garvan Hickey, District Administrator, write to the Minister again requesting a meeting and informing him of the Special Meeting that has taken place. This was agreed by members.

Cllr. Timmins noted that all the elected members would have to work together to progress the development of the N81 and to put into action what has been discussed. Cllr. Glennon asked if the Fine Gael members could use any influence they had to put pressure on Minister Ross to meet with the members of the Municipal District. Cllr. Blake noted that the upgrading of the N81 was a long term project and in mean time we should also look at short term projects to improve health and safety issues, improving traffic flow.


Cllr. Mullen informed members that there was a need to get the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly, Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy amended to include the upgrading of the N81 similar to what was in the draft strategy by if possible triggering a review of the strategy. Cllr. Mullen asked if the Wicklow members of the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly could see if they could trigger a review with support from Kildare and South Dublin. Cllr. Cronin proposed that the District Administrator should write to the Regional Assembly.

The Cathaoirleach closed the meeting.

Signed:


CATHAOIRLEACH

Signed:


DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR

Dated:

16/12/2019