

DRAFT ANNUAL BUDGET MEETING OF
WICKLOW COUNTY COUNCIL

ON

MONDAY, 28TH NOVEMBER 2022 AT 10:00 A.M.

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Nicola Dutton

Catherine Kollhof

(At 10.00am)

CATHAOIRLEACH: D a duit. Failte. Thank you very much, members, for coming to the meeting this morning. I've been told this is the most important meeting, the same as the Planning Strategy meeting and the LPT meeting. It has just proven to me that all meetings are important! So, with your indulgence I hand over to Helen please for a roll call.

HELEN PURCELL: Good morning. I would like to welcome the press and the public who are present and to remind the members to keep their mobile phones switched to silent.

For those who are attending remotely, if you have any issues with connectivity to contact us and we will get you back into the meeting. Thank you very much.

Now, it's time for the roll call.

[Roll call]

HELEN PURCELL: Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, members. Can we do condolences now Helen, please?

HELEN PURCELL: Yes. We pray for Kieran Nichols, father of our colleague Susan Nicholls; Pat Brennan, brother of our colleague Marie Hennessy; Lily Fitzpatrick, mother of our colleague Vincent Fitzpatrick; and Robert Webster, father of our colleague Alison Munnion.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Helen. Cllr Gerry Walsh.

CLLR WALSH: Condolences in relation to the Greystones municipal district. Firstly, Paul McNaughton. As most of us know, he was a sporting legend, played rugby for Ireland, soccer for Shelbourne, past President of Greystones Rugby Club. Condolences to Paul's wife Jean, and his sons. Also, to the family of Grace Rush. Grace was 14. Grace died tragically, approximately two weeks ago, in Greystones. Grace was an active member of Eire Og GAA club, playing in the football teams. She also played rugby for Greystones, played golf in Greystones Golf Club, and played hockey with her school in St Gerard's. Condolences to her parents Stephen and Orla, and brothers Joshua and Dara, and also her grandparents.

Also, Dave O'Regan, who was an active member of Greystones also, coached our junior ladies football teams. His wife Helen was our club treasurer. Dave had a financial services business at Eden Gate. Dave died suddenly, aged 42, also around two weeks ago. Condolences to his wife Helen and his daughters, Lucy, Katie, and his parents.

Lastly to the family of Mary Kilaley. Mary's husband Pat was a former member of Greystones Town Commission. Mary would be known. She was actively involved in the German-Irish society and would have travelled there on many occasions. She was also active in the La Touche Legacy Committee. Condolences to Mary's husband, Pat, sons Pat, Robert, David, and daughter Ann-Marie, and extended family, thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Walsh. Cllr Edward Timmins.

CLLR TIMMINS: Thank you, Chairman. Two condolences please. One is for Vincent Kilheney from Blessington, former local election candidate.

Secondly, for Michael Keogh, nephew of our long-serving colleague John Keogh who died at the young age of 46, following an illness. And son of Mick Keogh, an amazing community activist. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Cllr Irene Winters.

CLLR WINTERS: Thank you, Cathaoirleach. Just to offer condolences to our former colleague Tom Dornan on the death of his wife Helen. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Cllr Shay Cullen.

CLLR CULLEN: Thanks, Cathaoirleach. I just want to pass on condolence to the family of Malcolm Fennell from Redcross, passed away last week, to his wife Norma, sons Simon and Chris. Malcolm was a great community worker and a great friend to me, and he'll be sadly missed in the community of Redcross. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Cllr Lourda Scott.

CLLR SCOTT: Thanks, Cathaoirleach. I wanted to be associated with the condolences for the friends and family of Grace Rush and of Dave O'Regan. It's been a very sad loss for the community here in Greystones thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Cllr Aoife Flynn-Kennedy.

CLLR FLYNN-KENNEDY: Thank you, Cathaoirleach. Just to remember Ciarán Megannety from Bray who passed away on 13th November tragically. Ciarán was involved in so many elements of the community in Bray, open Door, the Chamber, the Summer Fest, and was an active sea swimmer. He will be sadly missed by all. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Cllr John Snell.

CLLR SNELL: Thank you, Cathaoirleach. Just to pass on our condolences, Chair, to the family of the late Pat Mitchell. Pat was born and reared in Laragh but lived his whole adult life in Rathnew. He contributed to the Gaelic Athletic Association his entire life, Cathaoirleach. He served on the county board in numerous positions. I think there's not a child or an adult involved in GAA in County Wicklow that didn't know the influence that Pat Mitchell had on the association. Just to send our condolences to his family.

The second one, Cathaoirleach, is a young man called Dylan Lynch from Broomhall in Rathnew. He had a huge influence in a short life. He was only 18 years of age. He was nine and a half years fighting cancer. We implemented here through the good services of Lorraine Lynch, or Lorraine Gallagher in her staff, in relation to the AD caller out on the front desk. That would have come from Dylan Lynch and his family calling for that at the time, the Able Disabled Caller system that was implemented by Wicklow County Council. Just to think, obviously, Dylan's vision to implement that at that time when he knew he was very sick himself. He was also instrumental in fundraising for a gym in the Purple House in Bray, where people who are fighting cancer and their rehabilitation to being able to walk after cancer treatment, and that was a success as well. While he had a short life, it had a lasting effect on people into the future. I just want to send our condolences to Dylan's family. Thanks, Cathaoirleach.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Snell. Cllr Avril Cronin.

CLLR CRONIN: Thanks very much, Cathaoirleach. I also want to express my sympathies to the Kilheney family, and also the Keogh family on the passing of Michael. Michael's uncle is the overseer here in the West Wicklow County Council area and also his brother-in-law Kevin works for the council. I just want to express my sympathies for the families. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Cronin. Cllr Melanie Corrigan.

CLLR CORRIGAN: Thank you. I want to be associated with the sympathies for Ciarán Megannety from Bray. He was very well known as a community person, fairly involved in all of the churches, great advocate for Purple House, did a huge amount of fundraising, and was a member of the Bray Sea Swimmers. We will all sorely miss him down there. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Cllr Pat Fitzgerald.

CLLR FITZGERALD: I want to pay my condolences to the family of Robert Mohan. And also, the family of Sean Maguire, a native of Arklow but buried in Castletown on Saturday last.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Cllr Tom Fortune.

CLLR FORTUNE: Thanks, Cathaoirleach. I just want to be associated with the commiserations to Ciarán Megannety and Pat Mitchell.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Fortune. Can I bring in Helen please?

HELEN PURCELL: I'd also like to remind the elected members that the book of condolences for Vicky Phelan is available on our website, wicklow.ie, if anyone wants to add to that. Thanks.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Okay. Can we stand for a minute's silence please?

[Pause]

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you very much for your contributions. Members, before bringing in the Head of Finance, can I bring in the Chief Executive, please, Brian Gleeson.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: I want to give a brief overview of the budget this year. I suppose at the outset I want to thank the members of the CPG and all of the members for their input into these deliberations. It's been a tough budget this year. I will outline the reasons, but it is really appreciated, the input from everyone in order to try get a balanced budget.

The 2023 budget sees an increase of €16.5 million on last year, that represents 13%. The budget expenditure provides for €144 million. The main reasons for this increase relate to increased pay as part of the National Pay Agreement. Obviously, energy and inflation costs, we're well aware have gone through the roof. Also, we have seen significant increase in income and expenditure under the Housing Payment and Availability scheme.

We've also made provision for approximately €1 million in expenditure in relation to our response to the Ukraine war and Wicklow County Council's role in providing accommodation for families fleeing from the war. This expenditure is fully funded. We have provided additional funding for key policy areas such as climate action and town centre regeneration through the appointment of a number of positions.

As part of our newly established Mid East Regional Energy Unit, which we hope to officially launch next month there will be a Regional and Local Energy Officer in place. We also got funding for positions of a Biodiversity Officer and Climate Community Action Officer, which will be in place next year. So, a lot of progress in that area. We've also got funding for a Town Regeneration Officer which will be appointed shortly.

All of this also, I suppose importantly, allows us to maintain front-line services. There haven't been any cuts to front-line services, which is very important. I know the input from the CPG, that it was a priority. However, in order to balance the budget, we, like many other local authorities this year, have had to propose an increase in rates. What we proposed in the book was a modest rate increase of 3% to be implemented. However, we did include enhanced rates negative scheme which would protect 90% of our rate payers from that increase.

However, in the current economic climate I acknowledge it is a difficult decision for the members. Following discussions with the different parties and groupings over the last week, we were asked to put forward an alternative proposal in relation to this matter as an alternative to a rate increase. So, we have done that, and Breda will be outlining that additional proposal.

Regardless of which option we do go for, I think it is a positive budget. There are a lot of good items in it, as I have mentioned already in relation to climate action, town regeneration and also, I suppose, maintaining key services is the key, maintaining our community grants scheme, which is hugely important for local clubs and community groups. So, overall, I think it's a good budget. I hope the members think that as well.

I will hand over to Breda to do her presentation. I would say after Breda does her presentation, what we plan to do is maybe adjourn for 20 minutes so everyone can have a look at the option B that's been put forward. Breda will outline it in summary at a point in the presentation, but to give all of the members a chance to look at it in detail and have a discussion over it. It's already been presented to the members of the CPG; they're aware of it. But we will break to give everyone time to fully consider it. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Brian. Breda, do you want to take over? Thank you very much, Breda.

BREDA MCCARTHY: Thank you, Cathaoirleach. Good morning members, colleagues and all others attending. I'm here this morning to present the Draft Annual Budget for 2023. We'll go through my presentation.

What I'll be looking at today is a number of steps in the budgetary process and the steps involved in it, the actual planned expenditure and income that has been included in Draft Budget, the challenges we faced and it was a difficult budget to prepare given the current economic climate, the various budget policy decisions that were incorporated in framing this budget, the income and expenditure adjustments in the budget just to give you an outline where the increases and decreases are within the budget 2023.

I will go through the commercial rates with the proposed annual rate and valuation increase and which is a reserve function to be agreed by the members, and the rates vacancy relief which is also a function to be agreed by the members.

As Brian outlined, due to concern of members, we have looked at another option to increasing rates and I will go through that option B instead of the original, as presented as part of the draft budget, and then just to outline where the various parts of the budget in relation to each of the directorates can be found.

So, the budget process is a four-part process. We had the local property tax meeting on 10th October where the members maintained the 6% rate which secured €1.1 million funding for the Council. Then, in the period from the 15th October to the 15th November, municipal districts held their budgetary plan meetings, and all adopted the General Municipal Allocations. This gives certainty to members over certain funding but can't be a significant amount because at that stage the draft budget has not been balanced.

Then the third stage of the process was adapting the statutory annual budget today that we are presenting to members. The final stage is the schedule of municipal district works. We normally wait for the roads grant allocations to be issued from the department before we send that out to members so that they have certainty of the exact funding that will be available to them in 2023. So, the decisions to be taken today are that we have to -- sorry, members as a reserve function we have to agree the Annual Rate of Valuation (ARV) for 2023. Members have to agree the rates relief percentage on vacant premises, that's currently at 60%, that vacant premises have to get relief from rates to that level, and they have to adopt the Statutory Annual Budget for 2023, which can be with or without amendment.

I will just go through, as Brian mentioned, the overall expenditure budget for 2023 is €144 million and increase of €16 million on budget 2022, a 13% increase as a matter of fact. Just to note in that, because they are substantial figures involved and it is a positive budget where we really have strived not to cut services, that there are significant number of costs that need were factored into the budget. Pay increase in budget 2023 was €3.3 million, of which €3 million was the recent pay agreement which had a knock-on effect on Wicklow County Council. Energy costs due to energy inflation and no doubt attributable to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have gone up by €2 million in next year's budget.

Other costs have gone up to the tune of about €1.4 million, this is our plumbers, our carpenters, our various road making materials, our road construction contractors. All of those costs in aggregate have gone up to about €1.4 million. You will see that as I go across the costs throughout the budget. We also have an increase of a net of €6.3 million expenditure which is really to do with leasing for the approved housing bodies, the payment availability schemes, where they have generated more stock that council tenants can be placed into, and it is good for the county and it has no financial impact on the Council in that it is a contra, but it does increase the expenditure up by net 6.3. Overall leasing is €7 million, because there's a decrease in RAS as that programme phases out.

We based the roads budget on the allocation for 2022 and this would have gone up by about €1.3 million, and we use that, but we do revise those figures throughout the year as the allocations are received the following year.

So, of this €16.5 million, you are looking at €14.3 million of costs that have are explained as follows. You see a significant increase in roads, attributable to leasing, or in housing, sorry, and then in roads with the new allocation, development management, included in that figure, actually, are Ukraine costs, that we estimate will cost circa €1 million in 2023, but they are again a contra, there is income to support, and recreation environmental services have cost because of the new energy unit and other cost factored. Miscellaneous services, you see a decrease but that really is just machinery – sorry, apologies, that is the G Factor provision being decreased, offset by increases in other areas and has other costs involved.

Then we're on to the sources of income which must match the increase in expenditure. Significantly Government grants and subsidies have gone up by €14 million and they're now 40% of Wicklow County Council's budget. Again, the leasing is backed by grant, our roads is backed by grant. The pay increase under National Pay Agreements can be recouped from the Department of Housing local government heritage to the tune of €2.8 million.

They also secured €1.7 million compensation to fund the energy cost inflation. We see an increase in goods and services income. The two main areas of this, there was an increase in rents just through to physical numbers, no actual increase in charges, but just the number of the properties coming online. And an increase in our planning income attributable to the increased charges for large-scale residential development. They would have higher costs than normal planning applications.

Commercial rates have gone up by €488,000. Now, there's two elements to this, if you look at table three in the book on page 4, you can see that overall, on the basis of our net effective valuation offer the values we apply to our rate, there was a decrease to €220,000 was reduced because of tribunal appeal decisions, the global valuation of properties, that was a national problem. A number of D lists, they would have been properties which were brought on really as part of the revaluation that really have been converted to redemption or other uses and not rateable or they're derelict properties. But to offset thankfully, the Valuation Office have valued new builds additions to properties, and certain revisions to the tune of €318,000. So, with those decreases and increases, we had a net income on our rates of €525,000 but compensating that was the proposed annual rate valuation increase of 3% which was going to has generate €1 million for us. So, overall, we are looking for an increase in rates of €188,000. Finally, property tax. You are aware we had the revaluation, we had new properties, the department secured an extra 2.5% of the surplus for anybody that was lucky enough to be in a surplus situation, and also the members retained the 6% so that generated an additional €753,000 of income for our 2023.

The challenges we're facing for 2023 is, as we're all well aware, the economic climate that's out there at the moment. It's affecting us as businesses, as individuals and in the council. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has led to shortages in energy, other products and has generally led to an environment of uncertainty, which has caused an inflationary impact, which has impacted significantly on energy and other costs. It should be noted the rate of inflation is predicted to be 8% for 2022, when the year completes, and over 8%, and will be another 6% for 2023. So that had to be factored into the budget, because to stand still and provide the same services as 2022, we had to increase costs.

As I mentioned, increased pay and pension costs overall, based on national pay agreements of €3 million. We have to take account of our climate action commitments and our energy targets. The world as we know it is facing huge challenges with global warming and every country has been called to do its part and every county has been called to do its part as part of that. So, within the budget,

the climate action plan, we have the energy bureau, and we will continue to roll out EV charging points and doing what Wicklow County Council can to commit to delivering savings on energy. The increased demand on housing expenditure is really as a factor of, we're all delighted to be at various openings of social houses, and it's great to have that new stock coming on board, and also the leasing properties which our tenants can be allocated to, but unfortunately both of those lead to an increase in costs for housing expenditure, repairs and maintenance, and actually in the area of pre-letting, because certain houses are reallocated and then older units become vacant and need a reasonable amount of expenditure to turn them around.

Road improvements - continued demand, I don't know if there's enough money in any budget ever to meet the needs of roads, or there ever could be. We are trying to meet that with increasing costs as well.

Match funding requirements for capital commitments. As you're all aware in the monthly Chief Executive report we have 11 million required to match fund the various commitments the government have ruled out, whether it's ILDF, RRDF, Town and Village and all the other various sources of funding that the government has offered to all local authorities, but of course comes with a match funding element. So, we have a requirement for match funding.

I will point out, just as I know everyone's well aware of, the baseline review is still outstanding. We have, in discussions with the department, a commitment that that will be actively worked on, and I do believe for Budget 2024, we'll be looking at an increase in our baseline. So unfortunately, we don't have it for Budget 2023. So, I have pointed out at the local property tax meeting and to anyone willing to listen to me, we are underfunded as a county and unfortunately that hasn't changed for Budget 2023. So, we are trying to balance the budget as best we can and I will - I won't use the word "Hound" the department, but I will actively engage with the department to ensure that process of reviewing the baseline is started and completed in time for next year's budget.

Finally, we must present a balanced budget to the members for approval. That is what has to happen today. So, it is a difficult process when you don't want to cut services and costs are increasing all around, but that's what has to be done, we have no latitude in that. Just to go through the various elements of the budget, our non-discretionary costs for about 90% of our budget expenditure. Payroll and pension costs, including various - all costs including fire service and everything like that, they add up to 53 million. That's a significant amount of money, but necessary for all to deliver the service being provided. We have contract items in the budget where the increase in expenditure is matched by an increase in income, and that includes our HAP and RAS programmes, our leasing, our homeless is mostly funded, our DPGs for private houses mostly funded, our roads grants, are match funded except for our own resources' element. SI CA P&L EO and sports partnership and Irish Water have funding and machinery yard is always a contrary item in the budget and any excess in income goes to replenish the machinery yard stock. Then we have other non-discretionary costs, we have light and heat, insurance, loan interest, capital transfers to fund deficits or make provisions in place for necessary capital expenditure, various statutory contributions and a rates write-off of which some of that would, say, relate to the 60% vacancy relief given to businesses that are not in occupation. So, they all add up to, as I said, 90% of the budget. So really, albeit it's a significant budget that has 144 million in it for 2023, only 10% of that do we have any real discretion in and that is area that I know none of us want to look at cutting services or reducing much-needed funding in the economy and community. But that is still like regional and local road maintenance, public lighting, housing repairs and maintenance, various community grants, various initiatives under environment, our arts and festivals, the library book purchases to maintain that, various economic supports to promote our businesses to ensure that you have to spend money to make money, really, and then our match funding for our capital programmes, but that impacts on what we're able to deliver at that level and then finally discretionary funding for municipal districts.

So, the next slide just recaps on the local property tax as agreed at the meeting on the 10th of October and we had 686,000 generated due to the revaluation that took place in 2022. The new properties that came in in Wicklow, albeit neither of those added that much based on the nature of revaluation, but we also have an increased percentage of the surplus for our own use that the department secured for us that we got to keep 22.5% rather than 20% and overall, they generated 686,000 extra for the budget. Then the members took the decision to retain the basic rate at 6% for 2023, which gave - adds 1.1 million overall, or a part of the budget being increased, only being 66,000, but there's 1.1 million there that we're able to ringfence for the districts and that they can spend on public projects and various community enhancements and it's money that is well sought after and well used in the districts, with four of the MDs getting 208,000 and Bray getting 277,000, making up the full 1.1 million.

The municipal district expenditure is a revised allocation, slightly different from what was adopted at the meeting, but just is based on where we're at with the adopted budget now. The town twinning - one small change in that I think that was part of the initial district that Baltinglass had taken on a new twinned city, so that was a village added to it. Under economic development, as well as the baseline of economic development and as well as some local authorities engaging in whether it's roundabout sponsorship or People of the Year and St Patrick's Day sponsorship and other initiatives to add to that is particularly set but included in that is an extra 10,000 per district which is a 50,000 overall budget that was set aside as part of the rates increase, which was to support businesses with their planned increase in the ARV, just to have complains maybe for signage, for Shop Local and other information like that. The Christmas festival is unchanged and just in festivals and others there has been a small increase of 6,000 in Baltinglass and that is to bring it up to the same level as everyone else. The minimum any district has is 20,000 for all festivals, Christmas and other Baltinglass was brought up to the same as everyone. Civic receptions are unchanged and discretionary funding, just a small change to that in that there's 70,000 added to Bray because this - they increased rates on the promenade for parking and were able to hold that in the district, as any district could do. It is set at 70,000 but it will eventually be exactly what was earned in 22 can be used in Budget 2023.

So as usual the Corporate Policy Group are part of the budget process, and we thank them for their input into the process. It's determined under the Local Government Act that they would be part of it, and they give us guidance because the adoption of the balanced budget is a reserved function for the members of the local authority, and they assist us with policy decisions and highlight any concerns or anything that should be flagged from their various members that they are associated with. So, the members met on 7 November, and they did - I have to say - express concern about increasing the annual rate in valuation given the current economic climate but they also were opposed to cutting any services, which really left me in a situation that I was damned if I did and damned if I didn't. The budget had to balance and so I brought in the rates increase to balance the budget as I felt that was the least-worst option other than cutting services. So, we've also met this morning and through a late notification from the department, I have another option that I can present that the Corporate Policy Group would consider might be the way forward. So, I will just go through the various budget adjustments now that we're in the budget.

Now, page 1-10, the Chief Executive has highlighted the various information, but just to give a synopsis of that. As I said, we've additional leasing expenditure and income of 7.1 million. That was somewhat offset by the RAS scheme decreasing as it is phasing out. We have a pre-letting expenditure increase of 335,000 and repairs and maintenance increase of 412,000. Again, I must note that that really is maintaining services because it's taking in pay increases, taking in energy increases, taking in works cost increases and it's taking in some additional units for housing repairs and maintenance. So, it is not - like, we have maintained - pre-letting is at 4.2 million and housing

repairs are 2.5 million, but they still would - I know housing would desire and did request more funding that we weren't in a position to grant.

We have an additional 104,000 for boiler maintenance, heat pump servicing and central heating provision. We are cognisant that under Housing For All policy that there is a requirement that rents should fund housing and not other sections, so we had to keep that in mind as we worked through - or as I worked through balancing the budget for this year.

Thankfully, we again have some increase or this year we have some increase in regional and local road own resources. Unfortunately, again, it is just keeping us standing still and then we have increased public lighting costs - a lot of the public lights are metered, and they are also - we also were in contract, which was poor timing, the contract came to an end on 30 June 2022, and we witnessed increases of 106% and higher over certain categories of lighting, and that has led to that increase. Thankfully the department did give some funding towards that increase, so. Also in planning, the income has gone up by 160,000. The enhanced rates incentive scheme which was to protect 90% of the businesses from the planned 3% increase was going to cost 240,000. We maintained match funding at the 700,000, which is necessary to support the various funding issued by the government. We have money in the budget for the establishment of the Mid East Energy Unit which is a three-county initiative of which Wicklow has taken the lead in, which is great for the county, and we also have costing for a Climate Action Plan which must be developed for funding secured for us. Additional fire services expenditure, 315,000. It's really pay and fuel and costs that need to be factored in. The recycling additional expenditure of 157,000 - again, due to increased costs. There is, just to note, no additional recycling charges in Budget 2023 - or, sorry, no recycling charges in Budget 2023 that we had proposed to CPG possibly and to members for investment in recycling centres. Based on engagement with the members and engagement with CPG, we didn't include that for this year.

So, under Community Grants Scheme we have retained the 120,000. We have retained the book fund of 320,000 and the library fund itself has increased by 276,000, again very much related to pay and costs. Parks and playgrounds are up by 126,000. Mermaid has a small increase of 300 to allow for the inflation environment it also faces to bring the allocation up to 332,000. There are additional net costs for Wicklow and Arklow harbours, some of which is pay and inflation but, of that, 150,000 is for dredging in Wicklow harbour. Not quite as much as the directorate was looking for, but as much as we could afford for our Budget 2023. Information technology costs have gone up by 380,000. Again, an element of pay and staff and again an element of we need to roll out a consistent and standard platform across the local authority. Everyone is on different versions, we're not using Office 365, we're not using Teams. We must offer blended working to our staff members, but you can't do it without the right technology infrastructure in place. Also, we have to make sure that we are secure from the various cybersecurity threats and - that are in place. So, we require this expenditure. Again, it's not as much as the directorate possibly would have hoped to have received. Thankfully, on a positive, we have IPB reducing our insurance premium by 124,000 to compensate against some costs. We also have other elements of income, most of which are positive. We've got 2.8 million extra, so I think it's about 6.5 million in the budget from the department for various pay increases throughout the last number of years. We have committed funding for the department of - well it's 1.7 million but it's based on number costs, so the increase we have to vouch for before they will pay it out, but we have increases sitting as 2 million in the budget and we will receive that 1.7 million. NPPR income has gone down. I have flagged at a local meeting that we would probably reduce it by 200,000. I managed to hold it to 100,000 but I can't have anything extra than 300,000 in the budget because the 2010 charge has gone in 2022 and the 2011 charge is going in 2023. So, by 2025 we won't even have that 300,000 from the penalties and interests and costs for units that are - for properties, houses, that are selling now that didn't actually pay their non-principal private

residence charge at the time. That's where that money is accruing for over these few years. The IPB dividend thankfully has increased from 151,000 to 397,000, so that is an increase in the budget. PEL income is standing at 200,000 in the budget and this is for any properties that we believe will be valued but won't make the rate as set and so can't be included in our budget figures. So, investment income based on the interest rate environment which thankfully is slowly but surely going from negative interest to zero interest to actually increasing. We were able to add in another 205,000 investment income into the budget to help us balance it and, as I mentioned before, commercial rates are up by 488,000.

So, this slide is really just what is in the budget book from pages 1-10, on pages 7 and 8 I believe, and I've outlined the major ones anything over 100,000. The rest of them are there. Just be cognisant of some of them that you're looking at the gross cost and then on an alternative table you have the net cost. Or, sorry, the income, sorry, so you just have to consider what the net cost to the local authority is. One thing there, I just haven't mentioned, or I had mentioned was the million euros, the €1.1 million for UK response that is matched by funding and a lot of the other expenditure items there are matched by funding in the following slides. So there in the book and I've gone through the most significant ones for you already. So, the commercial rates increase included in the budget to - or the budget to balance it for 2023 was a proposed 3% increase in the annual rate of valuation to bring it from 0.217 by the net effect valuation to 0.224. That would have generated an additional €1 million worth of income. That's the gross income because there were certain costs involved to protect small businesses and others from it. A point to note on that, folks, is that of that €1 million, €441,000 would have been contributed by 31 large companies or utility companies, the globals as they're known, and that would have been significant income for the council, and through the rates and centre scheme, of which we had a cost of 244,000 in the budget, we were going to protect 90% of the ratepayers effectively from the rates increase. Most of those would have been protected 100% and a small few maybe just about 4% of the ratepayers would have maybe had been protected 90% of the rates increase, so not an expensive thing. We'd also included as part of the commercial rates a 10,000 economic development fund for each MD to promote their businesses to just work with them in this difficult climate that they're facing. To note also, about eight of the local authorities have increased their rates at the meetings already held and the average rate increase is about 3.4% going across - going from 1% to 5% across those authorities and five more have included rates increases on their meetings, which are today. Most of those have agreement with the Corporate Policy Group with that, so they're hoping that they will be factored into the line. I issued a page about the annual rate and valuation increase and I just have two tables from it highlighted there. Really, just what I'm saying is if we just take one example from the top, say a reasonably significant business, a caravan park in the hospitality trade, which had a net valuation of 77,500, the rates bill would have been 7,446.90 in 2022. With the per cent increase for 2023 the rates bill would have been 7,696.80 which is a rates increase of €250. In 2022, the max grant under the rates and centre scheme was 250 for that business. We were proposing as part of the enhanced rate incentive scheme to give 8% or a max grant of 500 and effectively that would have left them with rates of 7,496 in 2022 and with the same rates in 2023, which meant they actually had no decrease and we had opened up - we were planning to open up the enhanced rates incentive scheme that even those with arrears could apply for it which is not currently the case, and those with arrears, once they engaged in a payment plan with the local authority, they wouldn't be excluded from getting the rates incentive scheme once they paid their 2023 rates in accordance with the criteria. Look, the various bands are identified for you there and really what that is about is showing the properties involved, of which 90% are up to 10,000 and showing the various income that we were going to generate, net we were looking at about 770,000 - 723,000 taking in the incentives scheme and taking in the economic development fund and really it was just the larger

businesses who were suffering an increase and, as you can see, even for a business between 25,000 and 100,000, the increase was, on average, 1,300 euros and it really was only the 31 local authorities with a valuation greater than 100,000 which are large, large businesses and global companies, utility companies, that were going to contribute over half of the increase that we hope to generate. And that was the basis on which we balanced the budget that was sent out to members last week. The other point that is a decision for members to adopt is the vacancy relief rate, which we've currently set at 60%, that rate of properties that are vacant must pay 40% of the rates but can get relief from 60% of the rates. We also have our rates incentive scheme for new businesses occupying vacant properties that they can get a percentage off their first year's rates and then a slightly reduced percentage off the following year's. Just be aware, if we were to bring the vacancy relief up from 60%, it would cost and alternative savings would need to be provided against it, but if we were to decrease the vacancy relief, every 10% decrease would generate another net, actually, after factoring in some elements for bad debts, a net 200,000.

So, this brings me to, as Brian talked about, option A being the balanced budget as presented to members and option B, which is looking at an alternative without rates increase. As I said, the draft Budget 23 was only balanced - and without services being cut - because I was able to bring in €1 million from the ARV. To be fair to business, we had to bring in some costs to compensate for the enhanced rates incentive scheme and economic development fund and overall, that gave me an initial 723,000 in my budget. However, as I said, based on concerns of members that with the current economic climate and that were flagged to me and to the Chief Executive, based on some fortunate timing that we received a letter from the department following the issue of the draft budget book, which is giving support for 2023, it has been flagged completely it is given support for the losses we've suffered because of basically devaluations in global properties, Electric Ireland and companies like that are valued nationally and then every local authority share of it is based on population and overall nationally it was devalued, which meant rates income went down for Wicklow County Council and the department have secured funding for 2022 purely identified in the letter as once-off, which I can make available to members, and that was to be included in 2022 income that they have identified 718,000 worth of funding for our '22 accounts that we have been able to incorporate into presenting a second option for the members if the overall proposal is not to increase the annual rate in valuation.

So what we're suggesting as option B - not just preparing for this meeting over the weekend, but I was actively coming up with a different balanced budget by going through all line items again to see what we could do and thankfully that probably wouldn't have been an option because I just couldn't have made it balance without factoring the additional funding that the department have paid, but I was able to - with that, it was just about achievable. So, the following alternative is what I need to take the net 723,000 income out of the budget. First of all, we have a line item in the budget for private housing DPGs, which are known as our housing aid for older people, so our housing adaptation grants or mobility aid grants. What we've seen over the last number of years, that we're getting an allocation from the department, and I base my budget on that allocation which, for 2023, is €2.3 million. But because of the inability to get contractors and the lack of people taking up the scheme, we have never really seen the actual expenditure coming near that amount. So, I've looked back over the last number of years and the highest it has reached is 1.7 million in any year, and no matter how much of an allocation was given from the department and currently, albeit that we have 2.3 million for 2022, we have spent 1.4 million to date. Now, that's no reflection on the unit within the housing section, but it's just the nature of the current economic climate and of the inability to security contractors. But if I was to take out the budgeted expenditure amount, which matches the allocation, so it is 2.3 million, if I was to bring that down to the more realistic figure of 1.7 million, I could take out 600,000 worth of expenditure and as the department provides only 80% funding and

20% comes from council-owned resources, that would allow me a saving of 120,000. Now, I just must emphasise, folks, that's no impact on services. That is a very sensitive area and all applications that are received will be addressed and services will be provided. That's just really something that has been in the budget for years and the way we do it is we bring in the allocation, but it is a saving that can be identified in order to help us balance Budget 2023.

I mentioned match funding and it is very important, folks, to have the match funding in place. 11 million has been identified in the Chief Executive's report that is needed for the various schemes. But on a once-off, and as I said, following the baseline review when we have additional funding, not to be brought back up to the levels, we can without impacting on projects - we can take 200,000 from the match funding figure. So currently we have 700,000 match funding and we can bring it down to 500,000 without impacting on any projects being delivered currently. Again, allowing us to balance the budget.

Just one item, your assistance, if you don't mind me, bringing into the budget, we had a very successful marquee in the Tinahely Agricultural County Show in 2022. It was funded by LEDA, and it was a success for all involved and it was great for publicity for the county. The costs for that were identified at just over 20,000-odd. LEDA wouldn't fund it on an ongoing basis, and it just wasn't picked up in time so I think for the amount of publicity generated and because it is a county-wide initiative, I would like to bring 22,000 extra costs into the budget to ensure that that initiative is repeated in 2023 and future years to the benefit of all....

Finally, this is where the department's letter comes into play, I still had a gap, even after taking in those areas of €425,000. The Department had committed €718,000. It said it must be included in 2022 figures and it said it is a one-off.

However, I originally had a provision in the budget of €1 million for what is called G Factor, or it is a provision for revalued properties that went to the appeals tribunal that have not yet been decided. We have the rates that the Valuation Office said that they think that should be generated versus the appeal amount that the businesses feel is a fair valuation. We have to provide for that, and I had €1 million in budget 2023 and reckoning going forward for those businesses. We've got about half our decisions at this stage and that's why I was able to cut that, I cut that by €800,000 for budget 2023 already, and we reckon the next 50% of businesses decisions will be reached in the next two years. However, just because that money came in and we weren't expected it, we have been able to add that to the provision we have in place for those G Factor businesses, and it has allowed me to reduce the provision I need for 2023. It's basically, it has given me the ability to build up the fund for businesses so rather than having to provide for those appeals fully in 2023 and in 2024, we reckon we will have to deal with them, with where we needed €3 million, I've been able to reduce that 600, leaving me with over €2.2 million for the next two years. I have increased the provision that will be in place at year-end 2022 by the amount granted by the Department. So, it is coming into our accounts as requested by the Department in 2022, but we just have been able to use it to go to our provision rather than to the bottom line of the accounts. So, overall, those bring a potential saving of €725,000, which is the income I had brought into balancing the budget through rates incentive schemes and Economic Development Fund.

So, it is, as Brian said, option B, where that if members feel in the current economic climate, it is just not reasonable to increase rates for businesses, that it is another alternative that members can consider.

Sorry, I'm definitely over the 20 minutes allowed apologies. In summary, there has been a 13% increase in the 2022 budget. This has been gone through in detail. We have managed in a difficult environment and following on from difficult years to avoid cuts to front-line services.

We do have to address increases to most services including pay, energy and cost inflations. We have some good news stories in the budget like the Regeneration Officer to assist the Town Teams; like

further initiatives under climate energy like the Mid East Energy Unit. We have managed to ring-fence over €1 million in discretionary fund for good projects to be rolled out in the other community initiatives.

To summarise, it is a reserve function of the Chamber to adopt the annual rated values, to agree the annual rate values and to determine the vacancy release; and to adopt the budget with or without amendment. I'll have a slide to tell you where the various information is. I might leave that up and we can go through it as we deal with queries on the budget. So, thank you very much, members.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you very much, Breda, for that very extensive report. I know you said it took you over 20 minutes to deliver it, but I know the work that you have put in this in the last number of weeks. I really appreciate it.

Members, can I propose that we adjourn the meeting for 20 minutes so that all my colleagues can go back and discuss with their parties or their groupings to discuss this, because it's a vital piece of information we have to discuss before we come back into the Chamber. Do I have a seconder, please? Thank you very much, Cllr Pat Kennedy. Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR: There are printed copies of the proposal and the letter received from the Department if you're going out of the Chamber or just it will be delivered by a member of the finance team for anyone that wants it, folks.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you very much, members. See you in 20 minutes. Thank you.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Myself and Breda will be available to chat with the members in the different rooms. Just give us a shout. Thank you.

[Break]

(At 11.52 am)

CATHAOIRLEACH: Okay, members, thank you very much. We will do a roll call now, Helen.

[Roll call]

HELEN PURCELL: Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Members, thank you. Are there any questions from the floor? Cllr John Snell.

CLLR SNELL: Thanks, Cathaoirleach. I want to first start by acknowledging the amount of work that's gone into this and the preparation within the budget. I know Breda has gone into great detail in explaining it and, obviously, option A and option B. I think to balance the books and produce a document like this, obviously it takes a lot of input from the members.

To say that option B is the preferred option for myself would be an understatement. To say that we have no increase on rates for our businesses in option B, no recycling charges.

I suppose, as Chair of the SPC, I want to clarify to the members from a housing perspective in regard to the HOBBS, the HAGS, the MAGS and the grant scheme went through this Local Authority, while it is a reduction of €120,000, it doesn't actually impact on anybody applying for any of these grants.

That in actual fact, everybody who meets the criteria and have applied to Wicklow County Council have been successful in drawing down a grant.

I want to thank Cllr Pat Fitzgerald, because at a Corporate Policy Group meeting this morning, to be fair to Pat, he's done more in regard to assisting people in the community, certainly in South Wicklow, in regard to being able to come back from hospitals and the like, to get back into their own homes. These are grants available to people who own their own home. It might jump off the page there to some people, but in reality, it doesn't actually affect anybody applying for a grant. We will still spend upwards of €1.6 million to €1.7 million and beyond if necessary.

I just want to put that on record, Cathaoirleach, that I fully support option B. I want to thank the members for their assistance in this process to date. I know we're only starting the process, but I think it's very, very important to put that on record now.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you very much, John. I have to bring Breda back in because I've just been told I have to go through each section. I apologise for that, for putting the cart before the horse

here. I just want to bring in Breda to go through each section then. If there are any questions, we can ask Breda on them. Is that okay, Breda? Thank you very much. Perfect. Thank you, Cllr Snell.
BREDA MCCARTHY: Thank you, Cllr Snell. To give members an opportunity to review it, I want to identify where the various programmes are contained within the draft budget book and also possibly just deal with a few directorates at a time so that I can manage the questions basically, if there are any.

So, the first, we normally take housing and roads together, division of housing, it has an expenditure of €47.3 million and income of €47.2 million. It has the summary by the service unpaid 61 and then the breakdown by sub-service and income on page 72-74 in your black budget book, members. And then, roads, Division B, it has expenditure for 2023 budgeted at €28.8 million and income at €16.9 million. The summary by service can be found on page 62 and the breakdown by the various sub-services and the income is on page 75-77.

If you do have any questions -- and I'm also happy if you don't -- can you just address those two areas first and then we'll be taking the other directorates in turn.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Breda. Cllr Anne Ferris.

CLLR FERRIS: Thank you, Cathaoirleach. I'm not actually sure where the item I want to raise is under, but it is quite close to the beginning of the budget document that we got out in relation to increases. It's in relation to the Mermaid Theatre in Bray here. The Mermaid is currently getting €320,000. Well, it got that this year from Wicklow County Council in the budget. They did seek a 10% increase, okay, which would have brought them up to €352,000. Now, I must say that as a member of the board of Mermaid, I'm very, very disappointed indeed that they only got a 4% increase which works out at €12,000. You know, with the amount of putting on shows and all of the budgetary requirements of the Mermaid, that is just very insignificant indeed.

Now, the difference between what they're being given and what they're asking for is only -- well, it would be €20,000 extra on to the 4% increase that they're getting, or €20,000 extra. I would ask Breda to try and find that extra €20,000 to give the Mermaid the 10% increase that they're looking for, you know, it would work out at the 10% they were looking for.

I think that is very reasonable, they're not looking for, you know, much more than they're getting. I really, really believe that they are well deserving. The Mermaid arts centre is the jewel in the crown in Bray. They do lots of outreach workshops and facilities for community groups, for professional groups. It's a great success. They have suffered badly over the two years in COVID where they couldn't put on any shows.

So, Cathaoirleach, I would ask Breda could she come up with the full increase that they are looking for. It's only a drop in the ocean when you compare it to the amount of money that is in the budget. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Ferris. Cllr Grace McManus?

CLLR MCMANUS: Thank you, I appreciate you taking the time to take questions. I guess I was a little bit struck when you said in terms of housing and people where we're at, even though we're seeing an increasing it's to match the increase in inflation and costs and particularly around homelessness, I don't see homelessness staying at the same level that we've had for 2022, I think we're going to have an increase in 2023 and I'm wondering if that projected demand has been including in the figures. Is there any scope for an increase in staffing in our homeless section? We've been talking for a long time about homeless outreach in Bray and I know that Teresa has been working very hard on that but if it's going to come out of already-stretched resources, I would have big concerns around that. Finally, the re-let budget. We've had really, really serious conversations in Bray for the last year about re-lets. Nobody wants to see vacant homes and I know the programme for the department for long-term voids and there is a new funding stream in terms of re-let properties but in terms of our social housing and the re-let budget is that something we're concerned about because I really think

in Bray we're going to struggle with that in 2023 go we don't have the conversation now about having the resources available for that. Thanks.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Cllr Shay Cullen.

CLLR CULLEN: Thanks, I want to raise a question under housing and it's the area around round arrears and I believe the figure is approximately 3 million that we are in arrears on rent, and I suppose for either Breda or Joe it's how we are going to tackle this figure? I do accept we've gone through a Covid pandemic over the last three years and maybe it was difficult at times to collect rents, but we have an obligation here as a council to reduce this figure and I suppose we need to be proactive in how we do that. We need to be putting structures in place, we need to be putting payment plans in place because at the end of the day, if we can collect this outstanding figure, it would go a long way in supporting housing in terms of boilers, in terms of, you know, new windows, upgrading our social housing list to the best of our ability. So I suppose, just to conclude, you know, 3 million is a huge, huge amount of money that we could be putting to good use, and I think we need to have a serious, hard look at how we are going to collect that money for 2023.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Cullen. Cllr Gerry Walsh?

CLLR WALSH: Thanks. Firstly on a point of clarification, that money there for the MDs to support local businesses, et cetera, is that still in place under option B or otherwise? Also I was going to raise the issue raised by Cllr Cullen there, the rent arrears, and I welcome the reference in the document on the focus to work with tenants to reduce the arrears in a considerate way. I know we've had Covid and now we have the added cost-of-living increases, et cetera, et cetera, but this figure has been stubbornly around the 2.5-3 million over two and a half years now, so I think it's something that really needs to be addressed going forward.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you very much, Cllr Walsh. Cllr Fortune?

CLLR FORTUNE: Thanks. First of all, can I thank Breda for the massive amount of work she has put into the report before us? I know from meeting her last week the work that she has put into it. I want to compliment only Joe and his team and the fantastic job they're doing in the housing area in a situation where they're basically trying to operate by trying to put a cork into a pint bottle. My question, Chair, is around - well, there's two parts of it. A12 on page 14, the HAP, the Housing Assistance Payment, has that been increased or is it going to be increased? Because I'm getting calls from people who are - there's a gap in what they have and what they get and it's causing a lot of stress. So I'm just wondering, is there anything going to happen in that situation? And then on the A10 on the same page, the approved housing bodies, I think that's a really, really constructive, positive area and I would just like to get a better picture of actually what's happening in reality in that area because to me it's an area that can actually contribute massively to the housing issue.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Cllr Vincent Blake?

CLLR BLAKE: Thanks, chairman, and I thank the staff for the presentation as well and all the work they've done over the last number of weeks in bringing this budget to us today. I'm glad at the fact that the rates - we had expressed at a policy meeting some difficulties are regards to the rates increase and hopefully that that has been resolved anyway. One of the things that disappoints me, probably, is the recycling, that we didn't grasp the nettle of it earlier on in the year. I think it's something that's going to be there in terms of not only our maintenance but our upkeep, the recycling facilities out there, it's one of the major things we do as a council and I think we started one here in Wicklow, Arklow, Bray and then in Baltinglass and the community wanted Tinahely to be a huge success in terms of recycling and I think we will have to go back at some stage during the year and grasp that nettle in that regard. So just a couple of questions on page 70 in terms of Irish Water. That secondments figure as well. Just in regards to the activities and the operations of Irish Water and Wicklow County Council, is that still ongoing or are we...

CATHAOIRLEACH: Sorry, Cllr Blake, can we concentrate on housing? I apologise on that, but this is housing and roads.

CLLR BLAKE: All right, sorry, well there were two questions I had then with regards to it. One is with regards on page 75 in terms of public lighting. There's no figure in there in terms of that aspect around the LED - the lights have all been changed to LED, and I was just wondering what the situation was in that regard? And there was another one as well. So I think there was some reference made to the Town 20. Sorry, I've gone past it. Where was it? The question. Yes, estate management. We have some estates and I have brought up here in the past as well in terms of estates that are small ones in a lot of cases that haven't been finished and since the fact that there's no expenditure whatsoever in terms of estate maintenance, either, estate management, I'm just wondering where we are in terms of trying to source resources to be able to do work in terms of finishing off estates that haven't been finished. Thanks, Chair.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Thank you, Breda, do you want to take a few of them questions, if you can?

BREDA MCCARTHY: Thanks, Chair. I know it wasn't part of the housing and roads, but the concern raised by Cllr Ferris is actually a typo, it shouldn't be 12,000, it should be 32,000, so the 10% increase that is been included in the budget. It's just in my book I had 12,000, rather than 32, so I'll just say that. Although it's not the area, it is a 10% increase for the Mermaid Arts Centre and there's also a slightly over 10% increase for the Tinahely Arts Centre in the budget, so we were requested by the director to put those in, and we were able to maintain them because we are cognisant like everybody else of inflationary pressures.

>> Thank you.

BREDA MCCARTHY: The budget has gone up by 220,000, I'll let the Director of Housing just illustrate what extra services are there but there is an increase in the budget. As regards rent arrears, both councillors are correct that rent arrears at the end of October currently stand at 3.2 million, up from 2.5 million at the end of the year. It doesn't have an impact on the revenue budget, just to be aware of that. We bring in gross rental income into the revenue budget and for social housing that's over 16 million. We just have a small provision for bad debts - really for very exceptional circumstances would we give up on a debt of 200,000. So it has no impact on the revenue budget but, yes, we have to acknowledge it as a county council, there is an increasing rent arrears issue. It is no consolation to this room, but it is a national problem and a national fact. Wicklow are not as bad as some county councils and city and county councils, but Joe again will tell you the measures. He has a team in place, and we are trying to address it and bring more and more people under household budget and doing what we can to work with tenants to ensure that that is addressed.

So the economic development fund is not part of option B. That is 10,000 each that was purely put in place to assist - to give money to districts to help businesses, to promote businesses in the current economic climate, in the light that they were facing increase and in the light, maybe, that just to get Shop Local, so we could generate the money and the business for them, so they would have the money to pay the rates in 2023, so they could avail of the rates incentive scheme. So that purely was what that money was for and with no rates increase, it has been taken out under option B.

HAPs have - the budget line remains the same. The biggest issue with HAP, and again, Joe will correct me if I'm wrong on this, is securing the properties. The willingness is there, and the policy is there but just in this current market I believe it is difficult to get properties. So we've maintained the budget at the same levels as in previous years and our return is lower than that. I'm delighted to say we have extra income in the HAP area for administration and it's actually funding the entire HAP programme because it is an administration cost based on the number of units delivered. So that is good news but it's just hard to security properties really is the biggest problem.

Public lighting is on page 75 of the budget book. There is an increase in public lighting as outlined in the budget book which 425,000. The majority of that really is to do with energy costs and some small element of pay. But we have an additional 70,000 because the Public Lighting Energy Efficiency Programme has finally gone - just turn around again and come in if I'm misspeaking, but we hopefully should be starting that in 2023 and we need more funding for it. We have a loan approved by the members to draw down to fund it and we have put an extra 70,000 in the budget to address that programme. Again, in estate management, there are - and again, the Director of Housing knows more but the tenant liaison officer position is a new position unfunded put in place and a certain amount of support costs funding put in place for that to assist and address the need at that level. So those are those for the moment.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you very much. Cllr Bourke?

CLLR BOURKE: I remember a few years ago we had a tight budget here and someone suggested that to balance it we might have to actually turn off public lighting to save money but it was something that was never followed up on and I was going to ask the question if we were to reduce public lighting, say, by 1 hour per day how much of an effect could it have on the budget? I'm not suggesting we turn off the lights completely, but just a thought.

CATHAOIRLEACH: OK, who wants to answer that question? Leonora?

BREDA MCCARTHY: We did look into this earlier when we saw the huge increase in energy and contracts. I don't have the particular email to hand but one of the engineers said by the time we increased the technology to allow us to turn off the lights and pay for that and upgrade our lighting to allow that to enforce any savings, it would be quite difficult to do. It would require investment and any savings, may be 120-200,000 by turning the lights out of one hour at night and one hour in the morning would be eroded by the investment necessary so it wasn't really an option. Cllr Bourke.

>> Sorry, can I just say, as well, Councillor, that would have been raised at the CPG at some stage as well and it was taken off the table. I think it was thrown out there at discussion level and I think the consensus was that that wasn't an option. So we didn't look into it any further in many detail.

CATHAOIRLEACH: OK, is everyone happy with them answers? OK, that's great. Next, Breda.

BREDA MCCARTHY: We'll take the next three divisions together, folks, albeit they're not all quite related, but just to move the process forward. Division C, Water Services, which has expenditure of 7.4 million and income of 6.7 million and the detail on the service level can be found at page 63 and subservice and income can be found at pages 78-79. Division D, which is Development Management, has expenditure of 18.3 million in budget 23 and an income of 8.7 million and can be found on page 64 and in more detail on pages 80-82. Finally the Environmental Services Division has expenditure of 16 million and income of 2.8 million and their summary can be found on page 65, with more details on pages 83-85. I will just address Cllr Blake's query on Irish Water. We have proceeded with it on an as-is basis, albeit the changes are arising. But it will be the situation that - and again, the Director of Transportation, Water, Environment and Services can address it as well, but it will be the situation that it will be phased out. The SLA won't be in place. The staff will move or will be taken in and replaced, existing staff, or otherwise there is a redundancy package on the table. Nothing has been agreed so it is where it is at the moment. The major concern we would have is that 1.5 million of our central management costs are covered by Irish Water and that is being addressed with Irish Water and the CCMA at the moment.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Breda. Any other questions on that section? Those three sections? Cllr Gail Dunne?

CLLR DUNNE: Thank you, I would just like to welcome the extra funding for Wicklow harbour of 150,000 for dredging. I doubt members would remember since I suspended standing orders last

month to discuss this and it shows the management are thinking of taking this very seriously and I welcome the extra funding and thank Breda for coming up with the money, thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Dunne. OK, Breda, next section.

CLLR SCOTT: Sorry, my hand was raised there.

CATHAOIRLEACH: I apologise.

CLLR SCOTT: You're grand, no problem. I just wanted to thank all the staff for their work on this and I wanted to note the allocation of funding for various climate measures, I presume that's under this section, and just to say that's noted and appreciated. It's great news that we've got money for the biodiversity officers, community action officers and the town regeneration officers and obviously the energy unit as well. I just want to make the comment, I'm glad to see the recycling charges are deferred, but I would urge that we start the conversation about how that's going to look early on in the new year so that we can plan well in advance for Budget 2024. But otherwise, thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Lourda Scott. Cllr Lourda Scott, I apologise. Cllr John Mullen.

CLLR MULLEN: Is this the right section to be discussing economic development, am I correct? In that regard, I would just like to thank the staff and management for including the Wicklow County Show and the Best of Wicklow in the budget. I think as the third largest agricultural show in the country, it's a fantastic showcase to meet and sell County Wicklow. It was called the Best of Wicklow and it is a very huge opportunity to network, to sell our products of Wicklow Naturally and Wicklow Tourism and the amount of people who came into the tent on the day we had it - because again a lot of rural people would think that it's basically roads and potholes our county council is involved in and when they see the range of services and sports and art and other community-based services it is an absolute no-brainer that we should have had a strategic partnership with the county show and I'm delighted that through the work of the staff and all the management there that we've achieved that I would like to thank you for that.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Mullen. Cllr Irene Winters?

CLLR WINTERS: Thanks, just in relation to DO 8, building control, one of our objectives is to maintain an inspection rate of 20% for new buildings output for 2023. In light of the, I suppose, the ongoing revelation of the bad workmanship and lack of compliance with fire regulations, et cetera, in the early 2000s and late '90s I would ask that if we're only doing 20% of buildings that we would try and target multi-unit buildings in particular to make sure that they are fire compliant, that it's not just self-certification, and that we look long-term at protecting the rights of both the tenants and the owners of these buildings so that we can say honestly that we do believe that any of the buildings that we have inspected and that we will try and inspect multi-unit buildings, that the owners and the tenants are not left in the situation that now some of them are in Dublin and around the country where they're actually going to be evicted from their buildings to allow remedial works at enormous cost to themselves to take place. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Winters. Cllr Tom Fortune?

CLLR FORTUNE: Thanks, Chair. What are we doing, are we doing three sections now? Or are we just doing development management?

CATHAOIRLEACH: Three sections.

CLLR FORTUNE: Which is what?

BREDA MCCARTHY: Water, development and management and environmental services that includes the fire service - so Divisions C, D and E.

CLLR FORTUNE: OK. Just on page 21 where we're saying that we have three sites on the derelict sites register, that doesn't seem to make sense. I'm sure there's more than that. I can think of two or three immediately in my own area. And I'm just wondering, on the bottom of the page there, where we have the various land banks, is there an opportunity there to help us going forward in regards to generating funding for the local authority?

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Sorry, Cllr Fortune, I thought you'd finished, go ahead.

CLLR FORTUNE: I'm getting my breath, sorry.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Take your time.

CLLR FORTUNE: The question is obviously the read of the report we've got to me is good and I'm just wondering under the LCDC, I mean I've asked lots of questions around this area over a long number of months now and I'm just wondering, can we have this kind of stuff brought back to the MD level so as we can discuss it as MD level? Because I think it's important in the overall context of things going forward. And on the offshore renewable energy supports, in looking at that, there's a lot of activity going on on our coast now, it's going to dominate the whole coast, and while it's very, very important going forward for renewable energy and everything associated with it, these are all very, very big organisations. They're basically going to be replacing the fossil fuel companies in the future and some of them are already global companies. So I'm just wondering, are we availing financially from a local authority perspective of the full opportunities that might be there? Because we're here today, like, obviously trying to manage funding and deal with being underfunded by the national government. So I'm just wondering, is there an opportunity there? That's it, that'll get me out for a moment, Chair.

CATHAOIRLEACH: OK, thank you, Cllr Fortune. Cllr Derek Mitchell.

CLLR MITCHELL: Yes, thank you, I just want to make a general point on the budget. This was the first year that the local property tax for the new houses is being collected and should result in a substantial increase in local property, as they weren't paying it for the last five years. But unfortunately, the self-funded capitaling, this baseline figure which Breda McCarthy mentioned, means that 5.7 million is going really from our funding to central government and while we might never get all of that, I think it's very important that when the next year - that's 2024 - is being reviewed, that we get a lot more of this, because the counties which have had very serious growth in population - Wicklow, and also I think Meath, need the money from this LCDC, need the money for those that come to live in the county. So that is one aspect. And I've complained for a number of years about a lack of services in a growing area, Greystones, and I note that there has been a review of drivers during the year which has added one or two staff to the district, which I'm delighted to see. And the Chief Executive has assured me that there will be somebody to drive the sweeper in Greystones, which has been stuck in the depot for a number of years, so I'm delighted to see that and also I understand that there will be a further review of staffing in more general categories next year, thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Mitchell. Cllr Peir Leonard?

CLLR LEONARD: Sorry, yes, I just want to thank Breda for her great work and for meeting me last week there as well. Just in relation to the environment - and I don't know whether it should be this or later on when we're talking about rates, but I just want to welcome, first of all, as well, the climate community officer, the biodiversity officer, the town regeneration officer - it really important direction to be heading in and also the community archaeologist that we now have as well. I love to see that shift in balance in the council and energy being put into those areas. In relation to derelict buildings and unsafe buildings and vacant sites, I did ask Breda this question the other day and I just want to gauge how many sites do we have not paying rates that don't fall into any of these categories in and around our town centres? And could this be looked at going forward and can we start creating revenue from these sites and can it be ringfenced in next year's budget then for the regeneration and maybe in lieu of a rates waiver for empty units being occupied? And just I know this probably comes under the Art section as well, but just, I suppose, for next year's budget as well, we're developing different art centres and we've changed it in the development plan as well, in the hierarchy for arts, that each town will now be able to have an arts centre and a cultural centre, so I think we need to look at the budget for arts centres and redispersing it geographically around the

county. Like we have the goods store in for an art and quality and craft centre in terms of the village renewing but we will need seed funding for that going forward as well so for next year's budget I would love a commitment and acknowledgement that there are arts centres and smaller arts centres throughout the county that will need funding as well going forward and could that be looked at for next year's budget? Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Leonard. Cllr Cullen?

CLLR CULLEN: Thanks, just a question I suppose around planning. As we're aware, there's a new planning register being adopted for landowners who have zoned land and I think it's regarded as a land development tax and it's effectively to stop landowners sitting on potential development land for residential use and I suppose a few questions I have on this is, from what I can gather it is a rate of around 3% of the land's market value and how will that impact on the budget for the County Council going forward, or is that land tax - does that come to us as a council or how does that work? Because I think there's a lot of questions around this, there's a lot of potential landowners who have land that is subject to this tax who are fairly unsure of the situation, but I suppose from my point of view, and the council's point of view, is how do we make this value - I suppose the value of this 3% of a land tax work for us as a council?

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Cullen. Cllr Mary Kavanagh.

CLLR KAVANAGH: Thanks, Chair. This is just a quick question on waste and we have nothing in against litter warden services, and yet we're spending 1.4 million on street cleaning services. I'm just wondering, given the amount of money that has to be spent enforcing waste regulations and cleaning up illegal dumping and stuff like that, is there something that we're kind of - is it an oversight to not have a litter warden? Would it not ultimately lead to a reduction in cleaning up litter black spots afterwards? It's just an observation.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Cllr Paul O'Brien.

CLLR P O'BRIEN: I want to thank Breda for her consultation during the process.

In terms of economic development, I know it was a tough budget, but in terms of our twinning budget, I'm glad it wasn't cut because it's something we should be striving more towards. Listening to our partners in Germany and France and elsewhere, it is something they're very interested in. I don't mean friendships or hand holding; I mean proper economic development. I want to welcome it. I think we should be progressing it more. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Paul O'Brien. Breda, would you like to comment on a few of those, please?

BREDA MCCARTHY: No problem. A few I will defer to the Directors of the relevant area.

All I can say to Cllr Derek Mitchell is that I wholeheartedly agree. Like, we do have €5.7 million of our local property tax that is going to self-funding and not to the revenue budget which would assist in helping to balance it. I would hope that following the baseline review, we get an increase in the baseline and that situation changes. So, we'll work with the Department and supply any information necessary on that.

Just in relation to the concern about litter warden services, that's just the way really, we account for our litter wardens. On page 83, it looks like we have nothing in for litter wardens but we have €800,000 in for enforcement of waste regulations, and that's where our staff that deal with that information deals with it. We actually have contracted some of the litter wardens out and it's involved in that, as well as our staff.

Other than that, I think I'll defer to Breege initially to go through the derelict site questions.

BREEGE KILKENNY: Thanks, Breda and the Cathaoirleach. Just to address Cllr Fortune's questions with regard to the derelict sites. There was an omission in the report with the vacant site, Tom. The number of sites you may be thinking of in Kilcoole, one on the corner and the two on the main street, they're on the Vacant Site Register. The Derelict Site Register, it is not really suitable for

some of them. On the Vacant Site Register, it is much more appropriate. So, if that answers your question on that one.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Any other answers there?

DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Chairman, there was a question about the LCD. It is a countywide committee, not the LEDA level. It makes its own decisions. It is not, for example, a Strategy Policy Committee that makes recommendations to the County Wicklow. The LCD makes its own decisions. It has four members and the Chief Executive. I'm quite sure that any issues that come up will be brought back by those selected members to the respected MDs, thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Director. Leonora.

LEONORA EARLS: In relation to the building control query, the 20% related to inspections on new builds only. Yes, there will be different categories of risk of multi-story, multi-apartment, and they will get a particular focus from the building control unit we would work closely with planning and housing on that.

Aside from that, there would also be inspections carried out by the fire service in relation to existing buildings for fire service purposes and disability, so that's ongoing all of the time. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Leonora.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: I will come in just briefly on the question Cllr Tom Fortune made, or the point he made about the offshore renewable energy. I suppose we'd agree with you 100%; there are huge opportunities there. You may be aware we set up a skills taskforce earlier this year and we have a number of industry reps on that. We're looking at the whole area of food film and renewables and looking at identifying and setting up educational programmes to cater for, I suppose, the demand that is coming down the line in relation to offshore wind farms off the east coast. We've a number of initiatives specifically in our Mid East Regional Enterprise Plan, in this particular year. Obviously, you'd be aware that the operations of maintenance spaces for SSE announced Arklow and Wicklow are the particular bases.

As regards benefits, when the bases are built and established, we'd have rates income in relation to there. We'd also have the Community Benefit Fund. That will generate I suppose multiples of millions down line when the wind farms are set up. That's a national scheme but we have made submissions. I know the likes of [inaudible] and SSE have made submissions on that to argue the point that that funding should be kept local. If the wind farms are off of the coast of Wicklow, the Community Benefit Fund money is generated through that should be maintained within the county of Wicklow. We have made that argument to Government. There's been no decision as of yet in relation to how the scheme would proceed but, obviously, there's an opportunity there, councillor.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Breege.

BREEGE KILKENNY: On Cllr Shay Cullen's query with regards to 3% of the market value for the residential zone tax. That's going, that will not come to us. That goes straight to revenue.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Is everyone happy there with them answers? Okay. That's great. Thank you very much.

Breda, do you want to go on to the next section, please?

BREDA MCCARTHY: The final divisions, folks, Division F, for recreation and amenity, includes expenditure of €11.6 million for budget 2023, and income of €1.2 million. It is found in summary on page 66 and more detail for expenditure and income items on page 86-87 in the draft budget book. There is €2.14 million for health and welfare. There is where harbours are. €2.4 million expenditure in the budget book and €1.1 million income. Services can be found on page 66 and by the sub-services and the breakdown of income categories on page 88-89.

And finally, Division H, miscellaneous services, this has expenditure of €12.2 million in the budget book and income of €13.3 million and that would be where the Department recoup for pay increases of €6 million and the energy recoup of €1.7 million would be included for all services across all other

directorates. Again, by service in summary can be found on page 68 of the budget book, and in detail for expenditure and income on page 90-92.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Breda. Any questions on that from anybody? I won't ask if everyone's happy. No lights are on. Brian, have you anything to add to this? Sorry, I just have one light. Cllr Sylvester Bourke.

CLLR BOURKE: Cathaoirleach, yes, you missed out -- I missed out on asking a question on the last section. I just wanted to come in. I want to thank the council for their ongoing support of the Pure Project. You know how successful it has been.

I commend the council for continuing their strong support for that scheme because it leads in the next point I want to make, which is a welcome for a new headline in the RTE News app there that says that the Minister for the Environment, one of the junior ministers, has announced formally the launch of the deposit recycling scheme for bottles and cans, which we have all been harping on about for ages. I think it's great news for this, that's going to be launched nationally and will cut down significantly on the amount of fly-tipping and dashboard dining where it is just discarded out the window, which will make our job easier as Pure Mile litter pickers, yourself included, Cathaoirleach. As many members here are very frustrated picking up probably 70% of the stuff, we pick up is recyclable bottles and cans. So, I hope that this new national initiative will greatly eliminate that scourge in our countryside. Thanks, Cathaoirleach.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Bourke. Cllr Gerry Walsh.

CLLR WALSH: Thanks, Cathaoirleach. Just on the recreation and amenities section and the outdoor leisure area operations, you have an estimate there under parks, pitches, open spaces and you have beaches further down. I wonder how this figure is calculated. The fact we don't have a parks division, I'm looking across the districts and I know we're relying on our outdoor staff in a lot of instances to maintain these amenities. I wonder how those figures were reached. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you. Breda, there's a couple of questions there for you.

BREDA MCCARTHY: Okay. I believe it is the figure FO301 parks, pitches, open space which is a budget of €1.5 million for 2023, that you're referring to, Cllr Walsh. That is made up of every district having a budget to maintain parks and open spaces of a couple of hundred thousand and overall adding up to about nearly a million of it. That is just even grass cutting in public areas, keeping verge clean, and maintaining roundabouts and any other works necessary that they're doing in their district. That includes the Bray municipal districts and then within Bray, the esplanade and other figures are included in that. So, it is just payroll costs and the actual materials and works costs necessary to maintain the county. It's not actually any particular park as such. It is just across the board in all of the municipal districts.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Breda. Brian.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: I think we have the decisions to make, as the ARV decision, the rates vacancy decision, and the overall budget options.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Sometimes when you ask a question, when no-one answers you say, I got away with that, but Cllr Joe Behan. [Laughter] No, this always happens when I go to Cllr Behan.

CLLR BEHAN: Not always.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Cllr Behan, no offence, you're just the last person.

CLLR BEHAN: I'm not taking offence at all, Cathaoirleach. I want to ask a question generally about the option B proposal. I commend everyone who has worked so hard from the official side, particularly Breda, and the Chief Executive and also all of the members in coming up with the two options A and B. There are pluses and minuses in both but certainly a plus for me in both of them actually is the fact that that mad proposal to start levying people in this county for recycling, that possible recycling charge has been taken out and I hope we're never going to hear about it again but that's for another day, I suppose. I certainly welcome that.

I think in terms of option B, the fact that no increase in commercial rates will be imposed on businesses throughout the county will be welcomed especially by many, many struggling small businesses who are trying to get things back together again after COVID and all of the hits they took during COVID. So, that is very welcome.

But I want to specifically ask the Chief Executive and to confirm or to publicly answer this question and I'd like it recorded, his response. Could I ask you, Chief Executive, to confirm that in 2023, no DPG application will be refused because of lack of funding? Thanks, Cathaoirleach. There thank you, Cllr Behan. Thank you, Cllr Vincent Blake.

CLLR BLAKE: I think the question should be answered first.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Okay, thank you.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: I will come in there. Cllr Behan, I'm happy to confirm that is the case. No application will be refused on the basis of the budget here today. Categorically, we'd actually welcome as many applications as possible. I'd like to have that situation where we are actually, we do get in more applications and we to have to actually pay out more so we'd actually encourage people to get in their applications as soon as possible or early in the year so we can process them. 100%, categorically, that will not be impacted on any application. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you very much. Cllr Vincent Blake, did you want to come in there now.

CLLR BLAKE: Maybe there are other questions there.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Oh, there is. There are no more questions, no. There's a couple of stages. I will bring in Cllr Gerry O'Neill.

CLLR O'NEILL: Thank you, Cathaoirleach. Apologies for being unavoidably late here this morning. As Cllr Behan said there, I'm glad there is no increase in the commercial rates.

Just on that, I've said it here before, and I will probably say it again, but in rural parts of West Wicklow there, we have the little convenience store being hammered out of it all together. They're pointing the finger at rates all of the time. Around the lake side, we have lost all of the shops bar one in Kilbride, a little convenience store. They're pointing the finger again about they're being driven out of business. That little shop will close in January. So, the whole lake side of Blessington, we don't have a convenience store.

I just wondered, you know, it's good that there's no increase but is there anything, in a lot of these cases, it's gone too late and they're hammered and they're gone. I'd like to see somewhere along the line some help, some incentive to keep these stores, very important stores, in place. Go raibh mile maith agat.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr O'Neill. Were there any questions, Breda, that you felt you have not answered? Are you okay? Are you happy enough?

BREDA MCCARTHY: I'm okay. There is the small business support grant for all businesses to avail of. It is 5%, capped at 250. For any business that will pay their rates in 2023, they can avail of that. It will be open to businesses that are already in arrears who engage in a payment plan. That's not, that's an ongoing scheme. We have that. We do as much as we can support. It's the best thing is just attract people to the area and get people to shop local and encourage expenditure and generate income.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Breda. Cllr Mary Kavanagh.

CLLR KAVANAGH: Sorry, just to clarify with Breda, has it not increased from 250 up to 500?

BREDA MCCARTHY: Cllr Kavanagh, that will depend on what the members vote on today. If the members vote not to increase the Annual Rate in Valuation, if they propose or they determine the rate to remain at 0.217% as in previous, we will not be in a position to offer the enhanced incentive scheme. So, the current scheme is 5% of rates grant for businesses up to €10,000, with a limit of €250,000. We were offering businesses purely to protect them from the 3% increase we are proposing in the budget, we are offering an enhanced rates incentive scheme from 5% to 8% and an

upper limit of €500,000. We wouldn't be in a position to offer that without the increased grant income in the budget.

CLLR KAVANAGH: Sorry, I understand that. It says on the line below, the maximum grant level has increased from 250 to 500.

BREDA MCCARTHY: It had in my draft budget put forward to the members. But subsequent to that, due to concerns raised by members and by the Corporate Policy Group, I was asked to come up with a balanced budget that didn't include annual rates increase. The only way I can balance it is to take out the net income I was generating which included the 3% rates increase.

CLLR KAVANAGH: So, that's not a national grant figure?

BREDA MCCARTHY: No, that's funded from Wicklow County Council.

CLLR KAVANAGH: Okay, thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Members, Brian, we go through the AVR first, do we? Sorry, Cllr Blake was first.

CLLR BLAKE: I was going to propose it. You were asked for a proposer early on.

CATHAOIRLEACH: I was. I want to make sure that everyone has their questions answered. Cllr Fortune has the light on.

CLLR FORTUNE: I want to make a general comment. I get the impression I'm coming to what we're trying to make a correct decision that will benefit the county at large and everybody in it. I think the statement made by the CE in answer to Cllr Behan's question I think is very, very important. I know the Local Authority are very good at putting out press releases. So, I think it's very, very important that commitment is put out in the right way so that it's understood what we're doing and what we're doing as an entity and the way we're trying to manage what's available to us in very, very difficult times. I think it's essential that that should be done so it is not left to 32 people to try and answer questions and make different statements that confuses things.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Fortune. Cllr John Snell.

CLLR SNELL: Thanks, Cathaoirleach. An observation first. In regards to one of the busiest little offices in this establishment is a heritage office. I think it's important that we acknowledge that here today for the least amount of output in regards to finance, the huge amount of diversity and projects that the heritage officer and indeed the County Wicklow Heritage Forum do around this county needs to be acknowledged here and I just want to put it on record.

If I could, Cathaoirleach, I'd like to second Cllr Blake's proposal to adopt this budget here today. As I said at the outset, a budget that doesn't increase the rates on our business people, that doesn't include an increase or a new proposal in regards to recycling charges ...

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Sorry, councillor, we have to go through the ARV vote first, the rates vacancy. Cathaoirleach thought it was just a general question you had.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thanks.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: If there are no general questions on the budget, we can move to the votes. Are we happy to move to votes?

HELEN PURCELL: We need a proposer. I understand the proposal is coming in Cllr Vincent Blake; is that correct?

BREDA MCCARTHY: Just to take a step back. There are three decisions that must be determined today and that are reserved functions. The first is to determine the rate of the ARV, the Annual Rate of Valuation. As you can imagine depending on that, it changes the outcome on what actually is adopted today. The second decision is to determine the rates relief percentage that has been set at 60% in previous years and was maintained at 60% in achieving a balanced budget for today. And then the last decision is to adopt the draft budget with or without amendments. So, I would just -- the first decision to the members, and if Helen wouldn't mind, I take it from general consensus that the decision is that we're not going to increase the rates. If you wouldn't mind reading out the

wording of the proposal, no, go back to the Cathaoirleach to deal with that and then Helen can read out the wording of the actual proposal.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you very much, Breda. I'd be happy enough to let Helen go ahead and read the proposal.

HELEN PURCELL: The first vote is to adopt the Annual Rate of Valuation for 2023. It is to retain the Annual Rate of Valuation for 2023 set at 0.217.

Cllr Vincent Blake, are you proposing that? [Yes] And that is seconded by Cllr John Snell.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Okay.

HELEN PURCELL: We'll have a vote on it now.

[Vote taken]

HELEN PURCELL: 30 for [sic], 2 not present.

CATHAOIRLEACH: The next one.

HELEN PURCELL: The second vote is to adopt a vacancy rate for County Wicklow. It is to retain the 60% commercial rate relief percentage on vacant premises. I need a proposer and a seconder.

Proposed by Cllr Vincent Blake. Seconded by Cllr John Snell. We will have another vote.

[Vote taken]

HELEN PURCELL: Can I correct in my haste? In the last one, it is actually 29 for. I forgot we have only 31 councillors. Again, it is 29 in favour and 2 not present.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you, members. The next one, Helen.

HELEN PURCELL: So, the third vote is to adopt the Statutory Annual Budget for 2023 with the amendments outlined in option B.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Okay. Thank you. Cllr Pat Fitzgerald proposing. Cllr Vincent Blake seconding.

HELEN PURCELL: The thoughts of the Christmas lunch is getting to you now. You're all getting ahead of yourself! We will be a vote. This is to adopt the Statutory Annual Budget for 2023 with the amendments outlined in option B.

[Vote taken]

HELEN PURCELL: That's 29 for and 2 not present.

CATHAOIRLEACH: That's great. Members, thank you very much for making my job very easy but I also would like to say a special thanks to Breda McCarthy. Breda, you've been 100% available for the last two weeks for this budget. It wasn't an easy budget to get across the line. I don't think, without your hard work and your extra, extra hours you put into it, that it would have got across the line. But I'd also like to commend you, Breda, because I know you have a lot of stuff, as we all have, going on in your private lives. There's a lot going on in your personal life this week. Your 18-year-old son celebrating his birthday which is a big occasion for him, and you had to balance this budget and also you had a bereavement and you weren't able to attend the funeral today. I pay respects to you, Breda. Thank you very much for helping me and you had a very good man at the helm, Brian Gleeson, to assist you in getting it across the line.

Members, I want to thank you all for getting this budget across. If we didn't, we would be defunct and out of a job. I didn't want to be the first Cathaoirleach of Wicklow to let that happen. There was a lot of sleepless nights on me as well. I'm sure Breda had lots of sleepless nights. I said it to the CE, he said he didn't have any sleeping nights. He is used to that playing hurling.

Staff, thank you very much.

Thank you very much, members. There's a dinner upstairs waiting for us, so we had to get this -- I'm sorry, Brian wants to come in there. Never mind the dinner, Tommy! Go ahead, Brian. Sorry, I'll just take a couple of speakers. Irene Winters wants to come in there. Cllr Winters?

CLLR WINTERS: Thanks very much, Cathaoirleach. I just want to commend you, Breda, Brian and all of the team behind Breda and Brian. There's a lot of people working hard on anything like a budget,

and Breda and Brian are the people we see here, but to thank everybody for their preparation, thanks.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, Cllr Winters. OK, Chief Executive?

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Thank you, Cathaoirleach, and I suppose it's just a few thank yous. Likewise I would like to thank Breda and Denise and all the finance team for the mountain of work that was done in relation to the budget and I suppose the extra work that we had to do to kind of come up with the option B. I was texting Breda and she was in the rugby club in the middle of the party and answering questions on rates. So that is the commitment the finance staff put towards this process and in general. I'd also like to thank the Cathaoirleach here, Tommy and all the councillors. I think the engagement is very good now over the last few weeks and we took on board all your input and all your comments and in fairness it was very proactive and helpful in order to get to where we are today and it's always great to kind of have a unanimous kind of passing of the budget. It kind of shows that it's a good budget and I think it is a good budget, given the circumstances.

And just to, I suppose, finally finish up with a bit of information and a bit of good news. There was a recent announcement there this morning just on our funding for measure 2 and measure 3. We had four applications submitted and all four were successful. That's in an amount of €1 million approximately, so the Blessington Greenway Russborough Parklands and House Trail got 178,000. Glenmalure Community Riverside Walk and Recreation Area \$120,000. Coolkenno Equestrian Trail, 198,000. And the Roundwood Recreation Area 495,000. So that's fantastic work and well done to Michael Nicholson and his team in relation to those applications.

I just also want to take the opportunity just to tell the members that there will be a workshop on the new affordable housing application scheme next Monday. It'll be on before our council meeting. It'll be in the afternoon. I think 12:00, Joe, we're talking about in the chamber here. So I think it's very important that as many members get in for that as possible. We'll have also a kind of general presentation on the affordable housing scheme at the January meeting, but I think the workshop is very important before the launch date happens.

Also, just the last thing I want to state is that you may be aware there's a new vacant home pledge call that was announced at the end of last week by the government, so that IT system is up in place now and there's a link on the Wicklow County Council website. So it's a matter of getting a message out to people for details on the internet. If you have a vacant house you are willing to provide to Ukrainian families, this is the system to put it up on and obviously we all know the increased contribution will be 800 now at this stage. But just to note that shared accommodation, where people are giving up a room, is a separate system. That'll be administered by the Red Cross and it's a separate system. So this is only for vacant single houses that are available. So that's it. As I say, thanks, everyone, again. Really appreciate the input into the budget and enjoy your dinner, or your lunch. Leonora, do you want to maybe just?

>> Yes, just to remind the members the public consultation on the N11/M11 bus priority scheme is on in the Glenview today and tomorrow if you wanted to go in and get details of the scheme. Thank you.

CATHAOIRLEACH: Thank you, members, OK. Enjoy your dinner, everybody.

