

ARE COUNCILLORS GETTING A FAIR DEAL?

With fair deals, training seminars and improved support services for councillors high on his agenda, Cllr Damien Geoghegan, President of the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG), tells Grace Heneghan he also plans to deepen the channels of communication with the Customs House, now that a Minister of State has been appointed with a specific local government mandate.

As councillors throughout the country start putting their preparations in place in advance of the Local Elections in 2019, 'Council Review' caught up with Cllr Damien Geoghegan following one of his recent meetings in Leinster House, to discuss his main priorities as the President of the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG).

Firstly on his presidential agenda is to secure a fair deal for councillors in regard to their terms and conditions, and he claims it's now essential to attract new potential councillors in advance of next year's Local Elections.

"With 949 councillors in Ireland, this represents a 40% reduction in numbers (from 1,600) since the Local Government Reform Act 2014. However, there's also been an increase in our workload across larger geographical areas; the role of the councillor has now changed beyond recognition, and multi-tasking is the name of the game against a backdrop of reform.

"The voice of the councillor has not always been heard as loudly as it should down through the years. So, it's important that the councillor is right back front of centre when it comes to discussing changes and reforms at local government level."

He says that the Local Government Act 2014 created a lot of uncertainty and people didn't know what was contained in that reform document until it was produced. "However, there should be a bedding-down period for councillors to get used to the reforms, at least for one electoral cycle if not two.

"The main issue over Municipal



The AILG President wants to secure a fair deal for councillors and claims it's essential to attract potential new councillors given that the local elections will take place in 2019.

Districts takes place at Budget time...and the real difference between the districts and the town councils is seen, especially for councillors who were members of both the town and county councils. Now there's a one-page document telling councillors what their municipal allocations are, and this represents a big change.

"Change was needed but it's the manner in which it was rolled out, but it still remains to be seen if this was change for the better. If the Government had devolved more power down to the municipal level, there would now not be any calls to restore town councils."



This year AILG aims to deliver more training programmes across a range of topical issues, following the successful seminars on mental health and wellbeing for councillors in 2017.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The AILG also plans to deepen the channels of communication with the Customs House, now that a Minister of State with Local Government has been appointed specifically with his own mandate.

The Association has invited John Paul Phelan TD, Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, with special responsibility for local government and electoral reform to officially open the annual training conference on Friday 13 April.

This year's training conference takes place in Damien Geoghegan's hometown of Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, to which Eoghan Murphy TD, Minister for Housing, Planning & Local Government has been invited to address the conference dinner at the Park Hotel.

"I welcome the fact that we now have a Minister whose sole responsibility is Local Government, which is very important for us and is a step in the right direction for sure. However, the elected member needs to be at the centre of all decision-making at local government level, and should be on an equal footing with the City and County Managers' Association; CCMA is well regarded and represented within local government circles.

"We're the ones who have the mandate from the public and to have the endorsement of the community and the people whom we live and socialise with basically. And this needs to be emphasised by councillors and by the Association."

So, is there a need to improve the level of communication

between councillors and local authority chief executives? "I don't think that relationship has been in the past what it should have been, and we're currently working to improve this. For example, over the last few months we have met on a number of occasions with the City and County Management Association (CCMA) here in Dublin.

"It can be mutually beneficial to both groups – the elected officials need the support of councillors and council chambers around the country in order to advance projects. This needs to be put on a formal footing with an agenda and a mandate, because it's essential to have cross-communication between both the AILG and the CCMA."

TRAINING COURSES

This year AILG aims to deliver more training programmes to councillors across a range of topical issues. Some topics covered in the 2017 included Emergency Planning, Business Rates and Valuations, Housing, in addition to the National Planning Framework.

"The reality is that when you're elected to serve as a councillor, you're expected by the general public to be a 'jack of all trades' from engineer to social worker etc. Practically every piece of legislation that passes through the Houses of the Oireachtas will at some stage affect a councillor's work at local level.

"Council officials throughout the various local authorities need to be kept up-to-speed with changes in legislation, so it's important that councillors are likewise kept abreast of these

FACTFILE – DAMIEN GEOGHEGAN

Damien Geoghegan (49) who hails from Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, was the first in his family elected to public office. His interest in politics was borne from growing up in a household where the emphasis was on current and international affairs.

So, he cut his teeth in politics at an early age by helping out his father during various campaigns down through the years in Waterford.

“If you marry that sort of interest in politics with an interest in your local community then this is the key to its success. It runs in your blood and gets under your skin.” However, he notes that the interest is either there or it’s not, referring to his two teenage children who have not shown any desire to follow in their father’s footsteps.

Their dad is now coming up on 20 years’ experience as a councillor; he was first elected to Dungarvan Town Council in 1999, and re-elected in 2004 and 2009, and has served as Mayor of Dungarvan on three occasions.

He was first elected to Waterford County Council and re-elected in 2009, and also served as Mayor in 2013/14. He was elected to the newly-merged Waterford City and County Council in 2014.

With many years of experience at regional level under his belt, Damien is the longest-serving member of the South East Regional Authority since 2004, and served as SERA Cathaoirleach in 2015/16.

At national level he has been on a variety of committees, and at international level as a representative from Irish Local Government to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. He is also a member of the Bravery Awards Committee and the CSO Advisory Panel for Census 2021.

He worked for 25 years for Glaxosmithkline (GSK) at their manufacturing facility in Dungarvan. Damien is married to Nananya and they have two children – Ronan (18) and Caragh (16). His interests/hobbies include sport, drama/musical theatre and reading.

changes.”

He added that the feedback to date from councillors who have attended these training courses has been excellent and added that they find it very helpful. “We have asked our members what they would like to see covered, and it’s great that the Department is fully supportive of it.

“These training courses are more effective than in former times when councillors attended conferences organised by other agencies. AILG’s training events and courses are fed by the demand of the councillors themselves.”

COUNCILLORS AND THE MEDIA

A number of training courses in February focused on how councillors could work with the media to properly convey their messages as council members. These half-day training programmes in Virginia in Cavan, Carlow and Mullingar were presented by two prominent regional media figures.

With 20 years’ experience in regional press, Peter O’Connell writes news and features for ‘The Clare Champion’ and lectures in journalism at University of Limerick. He outlined how councillors can best present their message to the media.

Denise Canavan, who works in daily current affairs broadcasting for Shannonside Northern Sound Radio, gave an insight into the local newsroom including the role of the programme presenter. She also touched upon the use of social media platforms.

The following half-day training programmes have also been pencilled in during the months of May and June for elected members throughout the country:

- 15 May: Dublin, Eastern & Midlands Region (Leixlip)
- 19 May: Border & Western Region (Westport)
- 24 May: Southern Region (Ennis)
- 19 June: Southern Region (Killarney)
- 23 June: Dublin, Eastern & Midlands Region (Dundalk)
- 28 June: Border & Western Region (Bundoran)

SUPPORT SERVICES

The Association and its President are also continually looking to improve support services for councillors. For example,



the AILG ran a training seminar on mental health and wellbeing for councillors a few months ago.

"We weren't sure how this topic would be received by the elected members. It was the first one which we organised and there was a phenomenally positive response. This was because it was run by councillors for councillors.

"Some of our members had approached us with a view to organising a seminar on this particular issue. So, we aim to run similar seminars at a future date; health and wellbeing is something we need to be very mindful of because the reality is that when you're out there as a public representative, you're meeting a lot of people and taking all those problems and concerns on board.

"Being a public representative is a tough job. We're really at the coalface and don't have the same resources as elected politicians. They have their offices and secretarial support and parliamentary assistants to deal with things for them, whereas we are on our own."

However, are councillors getting due recognition for the work they undertake on behalf of members of the public? "Despite what you hear in the media about politicians being tarred with the same brush or the fall-out when controversy breaks, by and large people have good regard for their local public representatives. The high turnout at the local elections tells its own story, as people recognise the merits of having their own public representatives."

Councillors are now getting into election mode for the 2019 Local Elections, he pointed out, which will also be high on the agenda at this year's AILG Conference on 12-13 April at The Park Hotel, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford.

The AILG President will be "pulling out all the stops" as he now looks forward to welcoming his council colleagues to his hometown.

AILG 'BRIEFING DAY' WITH POLITICAL FIGURES

An AILG delegation recently held a 'Briefing Day' in Kildare Street with senior political figures in Dublin to outline and highlight the current issues directly affecting councillors.



Pictured (l-r): Cllr Shane P. O'Reilly, AILG Executive; Cllr Damien Geoghegan, AILG President; Micheal Martin, TD, Fianna Fail leader; Cllr Pat Daly, AILG Past President, and Cllr Luie McEntire, AILG Vice President.



Pictured (l-r): Senator Gerry Buttimer, Leader of Seanad Eireann; Cllr Damien Geoghegan, AILG President; Cllr Patrick Connor Scarteen, AILG Executive; Cllr Luie McEntire, AILG Vice President; Cllr Bobby O'Connell, LAMA and Senator Maura Hopkins.



Pictured (l-r): Cllr Damien Geoghegan, AILG President; Cllr Luie McEntire, AILG Vice-President, Deputy Shane Cassells and Deputy Barry Cowan, Dáil spokespersons on Local Government.