

# AN INFORMATION SERVICE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

With LGIU Ireland nearing its first year providing not-for-profit information services for local authorities and regional assemblies, the demand for fresh thinking on local democracy grows, according to its director Dr Andy Johnston, who says the plan is now to recruit more experts from around the country.

**L**GIU Ireland is part of the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) Group with access to over 30 years' experience of local innovation, having first started out as a charity in the UK 30 years ago.

We are the leading independent think tank in Ireland focusing on councils and local issues, in addition to having a presence in the UK, other parts of Europe and more recently Australasia.

Over the years the LGIU has developed expertise in local governance systems and worked out how to get useful information to the right people within local authorities.

The LGIU has produced policy papers and think-tank pieces on the future of local governance. These papers attempt to analyse how changes in society such as demographics, technology and politics affect localities and make strategic suggestions that councils could adopt.

One important theme is the increased interconnectedness of councils and local stakeholders coupled with rising expectations of modern public services. No local authority is able to make decisions in a vacuum. The people and organisations affected by those decisions are increasingly aware and demand participation in decisions, not just consultation.

However, identifying solutions in policy papers and devising ways for local authorities to respond are two different things. LGIU Ireland recognises the numerous challenges an information and intelligence provider must overcome.

We have found that, regardless of national or political context, where independent and authoritative information is available to those who need it, the quality of local decision making will improve.

The best-run councils are those where informed staff and elected councillors work together, both having enough knowledge and understanding to contribute effectively to decisions.

These are councils that foster a culture of learning that are hungry for new perspectives, innovative approaches and willing to learn from others, especially colleagues in other councils.

## AN INDEPENDENT SERVICE

A useful service needs to be independent, authoritative, timely, targeted and widely available. To address these challenges LGIU Ireland operates in several ways as follows.

**A daily news service** (delivered each morning) provides a round-up of what the press are saying about local authorities across Ireland.

**An in-depth weekly briefing** on topics that affect local government in Ireland, such as briefings on the National Planning Framework/National Development Plan. These briefings are often used to provide information to local stakeholders and sometimes to provide the basis for papers to full council.

**Good practice briefings** that identify excellence in local government services from around the world.

**Briefing packages** on long-term key topics that evolve, such as Brexit, especially on cross-border issues.



*Dr Andy Johnston is a former councillor with over 20 years' experience of working with local government around the world.*

This package of news and briefings has developed over time in response to feedback from the various councils and that feedback is continually evolving.

LGIU Ireland's team is constantly on the look-out for emerging issues and latest developments. Members may ask to be briefed on certain topics, to showcase their good practice or for help in solving particular problems or to run events.

## The most popular recent briefings have been on:

- The role and functions of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC).
- Public Service Reform – the next steps.
- Ireland 2040: Lessons for implementing a national planning framework.

- National Planning Framework: A look at the Issues Paper.
- Local Government Bill 2017: Establishment of a Town Councils' Commission.
- The role of the chief executive in Irish Local Government.
- Ireland's ageing population: Local government-centred innovation.
- Culture as a catalyst for innovation and growth.
- The state of public parks.

### ASSOCIATE NETWORK

In addition to full-time offices in Edinburgh and London, at present we have a small team based in Dublin. Our research and consultancy team is made up of eight core staff members plus a network of associates with varied backgrounds including members of the Public Policy Advisors Network (PPAN), political commentators, specialist officers, academics and former chief executives.

We pride ourselves on independent, innovative thinking in support of local government and the communities they serve. As the membership grows and the demand for fresh thinking on local democracy in Ireland speeds up, we hope to recruit more expertise from all over Ireland.

LGIU Ireland also has associates throughout the world who are able to tap into examples of good practice, innovative solutions or just as importantly, ideas that didn't work. This year sees the launch of a partnership in Australia that will give the agency access to ideas from the whole of the Pacific region.

### RESEARCH AND CONSULTANCY

The next stage in the evolution of LGIU Ireland is to offer research and consultancy services, which is organised into three themes – building local democracy, stronger finance and better services.

The type of projects of interest to LGIU Ireland include the innovative approach taken by local authorities to big strategic issues. For example, we have recently completed research into housing, local government finance, inclusive growth, crowdfunding, women in local government and flooding.

As well as research we are also interested in developing solutions and have co-created an app to improve the local provision of care. We have produced reports for individual local authorities, government departments, the European Union, private companies and campaigning charities. We have a strong track record of advocating local democracy at international, national and local levels.

There has never been a more interesting time to be involved in local governance as new ideas and technologies sweep through the public sector. LGIU Ireland will work hard to support change that improves local democracy and recognises the indispensable role that elected local authorities play. We are keen to meet and discuss ideas, so please get in touch with us.

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With 19 local authorities now signed up as full members (comprising some 2,000 subscribers), LGIU Ireland is inviting others to follow their example:

- Carlow County Council
- Cavan County Council
- Clare County Council
- Cork County Council
- Cork City Council
- Donegal County Council
- Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council
- Fingal County Council
- Kildare County Council
- Limerick County Council
- Longford County Council
- Louth County Council
- Mayo County Council
- Meath County Council
- Sligo County Council;
- South Dublin County Council
- Tipperary County Council
- Wexford County Council
- Wicklow County Council

In addition, the Southern Regional Assembly and the Local Government Management Agency and Chambers Ireland have joined LGIU Ireland within the last few months.