

# BREXIT AND THE BORDER

## MONAGHAN FIGHTS BACK

With major challenges on the horizon due to an impending Brexit, Eamonn O’Sullivan, Chief Executive of Monaghan County Council claims that the border county is very exposed and businesses are experiencing a skills shortage. However, he told the AILG Autumn Training Seminar in Monaghan Town about the County Council plans to address the issue. Report by Grace Heneghan.

**T**he challenges of Brexit have been written about over the past two years this stage, according to Eamonn O’Sullivan, Chief Executive of Monaghan County Council. “Currently businesses are experiencing a skills shortage and there’s a problem with graduate retention. But Monaghan County Council has a number of plans in place to address this issue and to get graduates to return to the county.

“One of the invisible signs on the impact of the border is the rate of vacancy and dereliction, and this does have an impact in some quarters on community spirit. You need a vibrant economy to create a positive community spirit, and that’s something we’re working on all the time. So, how are we tackling these problems?”

O’Sullivan, who was one of the guest speakers at the recent AILG Autumn Training Seminar in the Hillgrove Hotel in Monaghan Town, said that as a border county Monaghan was very exposed. “The combination of people in the community and council staff, together with a strong sense of the region working very closely with business is having an impact already.

“We’re very active with a number of business support packages in place through the Local Enterprise Office (LEO). We have also created a low-cost business environment and we treat business customers as priority customers – they are prioritised by our planning and economic development council staff because they are so important to the county.”

### ENTERPRISING NETWORKS

With a short turnaround time on planning applications submitted to the council, Monaghan’s Chief Executive pointed to Combilift – one of the county’s largest employers – as a case in point.

“Martin McVicar, CEO of Combilift, will address this in his presentation. A planning application for the development of their €50m headquarters on the Armagh Road took just 35 working days to process. That’s how important it is for us to prioritise job creation, enterprise development and to get things done working closely with the business sector in the county,” he added.

“The LEO network in Monaghan has done a tremendous job in supporting the SME sector and that’s becoming even more important in light of Brexit, in addition to providing local initiatives and support packages in the area of skills and providing incubation and enterprise space. For example, APR is a cross-



*A native of Wicklow, Eamonn O’Sullivan had spent over 16 years with Kildare County Council as Director of Economic Development, Enterprise, Tourism & Corporate Services, before his appointment as Chief Executive of Monaghan County on 25 January 2016.*

border business development programme that the north east of the country (both north and south of the border) is working on together.

### ADDRESSING SKILLS SHORTAGE

Monaghan County Council has worked on developing job traineeships and skills in association with some of the county’s

## AILG TRAINING SEMINAR

leading employers, such as Combilift, ComputerShare, Monaghan Biosciences and Entekra to address the skills shortages.

“Combilift, which is a global business operating in 85 countries worldwide, is going into its third year of its traineeship programme and has been accredited as part of the National Apprentice Scheme. And within the two years of its development 20 apprentices each year have received full-time employment with Combilift once they graduate from the programme.

“This initiative is being offered by the Monaghan Institute, a third-level facility which has been developed by the Cavan-Monaghan Education Training Board, working very closely with Monaghan County Council.”

Meanwhile, in terms of research and innovation, this side of Entekra’s business is being run from Monaghan, and the company now offers 100-150 full-time jobs. “They’re currently designing the homes here in Monaghan in relation to servicing the US market; and then they are built in California. It shows that you can deliver a growing business from a border county.” Likewise, from a financial services point of view ComputerShare is running its international transactions from Monaghan,

### SITES SET ON WORK SPACES

Monaghan County Council is also heavily engaged in the direct provision of work spaces in Monaghan Town and also in Clones,

Ballybay and Emyvale. “We have planning permission in place to develop C-Tech Two and N-Tech Three because there’s demand for this space, and if we get planning permission in place we can get these units built and will be able to market and fill them.

“The provision of industrial sites is another area in which we’re very active. IDA Ireland has a site in Monaghan which has been vacant for the past 40 years and with the considerable support of our local Minister Heather Humphreys, who’s now the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, we’re working very closely with the IDA to develop and advance technology and open a factory on that site.

“The recent budget announcement has earmarked Monaghan as one of the new sites for IDA Ireland, which is largely due to the efforts of Minister Humphreys with the support of the council.”

### SECOND SITE STRATEGY

Eamonn O’Sullivan explained that the council is also adapting what he referred to as a “second site strategy”. With Carrickmacross within a 45 minute-drive from Dublin Airport, the council is putting a number of initiatives in place to encourage firms to move out from the city to a low-cost area, such as Carrickmacross and other parts of Monaghan, which can offer a better quality of life.

“It will take some time to see this bear fruit, but we’re



*AILG President Cllr Luie McEntire makes a special presentation to Eamonn O’Sullivan, Chief Executive of Monaghan County Council, following his address to delegates at the AILG Autumn Training Seminar at the Hillgrove Hotel, Monaghan Town on 25 October.*

ideally positioned now in terms of our location as a half-way point between Dublin and Belfast with good transport connections. This is something we're looking to build on in the future."

And now with every one of the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) in Monaghan working on the provision of Brexit supports, the County Council's Chief Executive said that they have engaged with the businesses in the county. "This is to ensure they pick up on the supports available, in terms of mentoring and training. We ensure that they're looking at how Brexit will have a potential impact upon their business."

Over 400 businesses attended the 'Getting Brexit Roadshow' organised by the Dept of Foreign Affairs' which visited Monaghan recently. They received very good advice and very good assistance, and this is a sign of how relevant it is in a border county such as Monaghan.

### VACANCY AND DERELICTION

Monaghan is no stranger to the need for more suitable housing developments throughout the county. And the issue of vacancy and dereliction, which is commonplace, is being urgently addressed by Monaghan County Council.

"We have taken up Pillar 5 of Rebuilding Ireland, which 'encourages and incentivises towns and villages in rural Ireland', and we developed a renewal scheme for Clones by using the Derelict Sites legislation to acquire in the region of 10 properties to CPO (compulsory purchase orders). We added to that by having some purchases by agreement.

"Through this we were able to identify areas within Clones town centre that needed a focused approach, and we put a package together and the Dept of Housing, Planning and Local Government had given us the task of producing 21 residential units that were in poor condition and many in a derelict state for 30 years or more. We took ownership and totally refurbished them, and we're now on the way to making available 21 residential units by 2020."

Eamonn O'Sullivan pointed out that this development is making a statement in Clones that "Monaghan County Council, with the support of the councillors, will not allow vacancy and dereliction to continue as before. With business confidence returning we're working very closely with the town regeneration team in Clones, and by late 2019 and early 2020 these units will be occupied".

The council has also completed a lot of turn-key



*Cllr Luie McEntire, AILG President; Shirley Clerkin, Heritage Officer with Monaghan County Council; and Cllr Mary Hanna Hourigan, AILG Vice-President. In her address on the implications of Brexit on Ireland's culture and heritage, Shirley Clerkin pointed out plans by the council to roll out a north-south mentoring programme for training courses and sharing skills.*

developments with developers both in Monaghan Town and Carrickmacross, and is working very closely with the Affordable Housing Bodies such as Respond and Tuath Housing Associations to deliver units. As part of this €70 development programme, Monaghan County Council currently has over 600 units in that pipeline. "For example, there are only about 20 properties to rent on daft.ie in the entire county, so we have a very lengthy housing waiting list, but we're continuing to tackle it."

### THERE'S 'MORE TO MONAGHAN'

The border county is also participating in a Peace Corps Action Plan valued at €3m (2017-2020) and the council is mid-way through that programme. The proposed Monaghan Peace Campus, which will include a library, museums and a civic centre, is now ready to go to tender and the aim is to continue regeneration in Monaghan Town.

"We're using the 'More to Monaghan' tagline to promote Monaghan and get the branding across, both at home and abroad, in terms of tourism and attracting people here to see what the county has to offer.

"So, we're using social media more and more to get the message out there. There's been good traction on our #MyMonaghan Twitter campaign to date. We're also working on tourism programmes, in relation to funding applications to Fáilte Ireland, for example, and anywhere else where we can leverage funding to develop the county."

In terms of tourism development, he outlined the number of major heritage attractions which the council aims to enhance. For example, it has a masterplan in place for the Coillte-owned



Rossmore Park. Described as a “valuable amenity” to Monaghan Town by O’Sullivan, he said that it is set to receive a recreational loan of €500,000.

Work is also in progress on the Patrick Kavanagh Visitor Centre, while the Clones Market House (which will be the new home of the Municipal District Office) is also undergoing a major refurbishment programme.

### CROSS-BORDER PROJECTS

A native of Wicklow, Eamonn O’Sullivan, who had spent over 16 years with Kildare County Council as Director of Economic Development, Enterprise, Tourism & Corporate Services, was appointed Chief Executive of Monaghan County in January 2016.

With a dearth of mountains on the flat plains of Kildare, he commented that the same cannot be said of Monaghan. “Sliabh Beagh is a beautiful upland mountain area on the border of the county – and we’ve developed a master plan with Fermanagh Local District Council as one of a number of cross-border projects to promote this area,” he said.

Meanwhile, Phase 2 of the Ulster Canal Greenway is in the pipeline – this 22km project, which will provide a Greenway between Smithborough in County Monaghan and Middletown in County Armagh, is to receive funding under Inter-Rail. “We’re doing a lot but this couldn’t be done without the support, both politically and financially, of our elected members, and we share the same vision of what this county can achieve. Brexit is a backdrop to that, but Monaghan County has a

resilience.

“The work ethic, industrious nature and entrepreneurship in Monaghan will stand us in good stead, regardless of the outcome of Brexit. And we look forward to working with the businesses and the communities here to ensure that the county is not adversely affected.”

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