

# THE ELECTED VOICE FOR COUNCILLORS

Mick Cahill's time at the helm of Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) has seen a progressive vision take hold, linking both local and national politics. He recently spoke with Lorraine Courtney about his presidential priorities for a national organisation that represents the elected members of Ireland's 31 local authorities.

**W**hen Longford's Cllr Mick Cahill was running for the presidency of the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG), a key theme of his campaign was his strong belief that the organisation had even greater potential to support councillors.

"I wanted to bring new energy and drive to an organisation with the potential to be a touchstone for information, resources and guidance for local representatives across every community in Ireland" he said.

"As elected councillors, we really are at the heart of local government and I have great respect for the contribution of elected members in our democratic local government system. The elected members, through our association, are fundamental stakeholders in decision making and the allocation of resources – it is vital that their voice is heard on issues at all times in a way that matters."

## STRATEGIC REVIEW

He said it was a privilege to be elected to steer the work of the AILG, adding that he has vowed to undertake a comprehensive review of current activities and position the Association to look forward with purpose.

Cahill commissioned a Strategic Review of the organisation in October 2019, upon taking office, resulting in a range of new recommendations aimed at elevating the Association as the necessary high level voice for councillors, and the main lead on policy making, which affects local government with government departments and agencies.

Representing the elected members of Ireland's 31 county and city councils, the national organisation acts as a networking, policy development and training resource for elected members from councils ranging across urban, suburban and rural areas, he said.

"One of our aims is to ensure the elected local voice is represented in government departments and throughout the full



*The Strategic Review of the organisation, commissioned by Cllr Mick Cahill in October 2019, upon taking office, has resulted in a range of new recommendations aimed at elevating the Association as a necessary high level voice for councillors.*

range of state agencies," Cahill noted, adding that councillors are uniquely placed to ensure that detailed knowledge of the needs of local communities shapes policy development at both local and national level.

"There needs to be synergies between the work and thinking being done on the ground and the national progress on policy and strategy - and that's also where we come in. We listen to what's happening and we ensure the local impact of policy is not lost."

The AILG President undertook a Strategic Review to consider how the Association could improve its support services and communications to councillors, noting its long history of engagement with elected representatives, supported by an experienced team of AILG's directors Liam Kenny and Tom Moylan.

## RESPONDING TO LOCAL NEEDS

"The organisation must be responsive to newly-elected councillors as well as longer-serving representatives, as they negotiate an increasingly complex local government system," said Cahill.

## AILG PRESIDENT



*Jim Gavin, who shared a few 'points' and his 'goals' during his time as manager of Dublin's Senior Football Team as the guest speaker at the AILG conference dinner, pictured (centre) with (from left) Liam Kenny, AILG's Director, Cllr Mick Cahill, AILG President, Robert Troy TD, and Tommy Moylan, AILG Director.*

It is the Longford councillor's vision that the AILG will develop and deliver high quality training that builds capacity and confidence to engage with all elements of local government, providing insight into the system, new schemes and initiatives, the potential for projects and collaborations.

"In short, it gets every councillor on the ground running with the skills needed to not only handle extremely sensitive and personal issues that people locally have, but the know-how to move swiftly and act in a way that ensures the system works best for everyone in that instance and in future."

### REFORM PROJECT TEAM

The AILG's mission is also in building understanding both within the civil service and externally of the work and role of the councillor as a democratic representative of the community. In January 2020 a final report was produced regarding the AILG mission statement, policy and advocacy, training, supports and communication strategy. A project team has also been set up and will sit for two years to deliver on the recommendations.

Securing proper remuneration is an important element of the advocacy AILG is engaged in. A report published was commissioned in mid-2018 by the Department from Sara Moorhead, SC, reviewing the workloads and remuneration of elected members across Ireland. Cahill said that it is unacceptable that the report has been so long delayed.

"Analysis carried out by the Association among its membership revealed the substantial workloads of councillors,

### FACTFILE – MICK CAHILL, AILG PRESIDENT (2019-20)

*First elected to Longford County Council in 2004, representing the Ballymahon Electoral Area, Cllr Mick Cahill was Cathaoirleach of Longford County Council in 2016/2017.*

*Having spent his working life (46 years to be exact) with Bord Na Mona, Mick recently retired, having previously worked his way up to the position of supply-chain manager with the company.*

*He graduated with a Certificate in Business from Athlone IT in 2007. Mick was elected President of the AILG at its AGM in September 2019.*



with many putting in an average of 34 hours a week in serving their communities, and they cannot be ignored.”

### GENDER EQUALITY

Cahill has also led out strongly regarding the correlation between inadequate remuneration for councillors and the effect this has had on the sustainable capacity to engage with local government from many key groups in society, including women.

“It is clear to everyone that half of our population is not physically at the table where decisions are made, and that needs to change. It is imperative that we look at the system, and how being a member of elected office can be made much more accessible and financially sustainable for people who have the ability to make that commitment to local representation.

“There are many issues to examine, both inside and outside

the system itself that impacts on who decides to run for election, who is elected, or who runs again,” he said.

“However, the very least we can do is to make sure that the decision to be part of or continue in public life is not decided by your financial means, your gender or anything other than your commitment, your vision and your work-ethic.”

### NORTHERN IRELAND

Cahill is also anxious to establish and maintain contact with elected colleagues in Northern Ireland. “We can each learn from our experiences in providing support to elected members,” he said.

“I attended the annual conference of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association in Belfast in February and was impressed by initiatives that NILGA had taken in terms of training

### WOMEN’S LOCAL GOVERNMENT NETWORK

*The AILG Annual Conference on 5 March in Longford also featured the inaugural meeting of the Women’s Local Government Network, to provide guidance on establishing such networks for women at local authority level, to enable them to strengthen their impact and bring about equality and a gender balance in the membership and work of Ireland’s local authorities.*

*The meeting was chaired by AILG Vice-President Cllr Anne Colgan and the panel of speakers included Catherine Lane, Women in Local, Community and Rural Development Officer with the National Women’s Council of Ireland; Tara Farrell, Deputy CEO of Longford Women’s Link; and Cllr Elisa O’Donovan, Limerick City & County Council (pictured below).*

*There was tremendous energy, positivity and enthusiasm from the AILG delegates who participated in the session and indicated a very clear desire for local and regional women’s networks to be established. The AILG gave a clear commitment to the delegates to help, assist and collaborate in the setting up of these networks.*





*Mick Cahill with former AILG presidents Louis Belton, Pat Fitzpatrick and Luie McEntire*

for elected members. There is certainly something to be learned from our colleagues in the north."

### CLIMATE ACTION

With the theme of climate action taking centre stage at the AILG's annual conference in Longford on 5 March, the issue has a particular resonance in the Midlands region with the impending closure of the local ESB power stations and the challenges this will bring.

Cahill, who just recently retired from Bord na Mona, where he started work as a craftsman on his 16th birthday, is particularly interested in the 'Just Transition' programme, which is looking at sustaining Midlands areas as the peat extraction industry is wound down. This will bring an end to both an economy and a culture based on peat harvesting.

"I was with Bord na Mona for 46 years in various roles," said the Longford-based councillor. "The Midlands must be adequately looked after now and there is a lot of work required, including government intervention, social support and funding to try and retain the Midlands as an area of economic value to the country, which it has been for a long

time. The region has huge potential in terms of its tourism offering and the local leadership must ensure that the awareness is maintained there."

### UP FOR THE CHALLENGE

Ireland is one of the most centralised countries in Europe, and elected members are clearly ready and willing to take on more responsibilities to make the best decisions for their communities.

"It will be imperative to consider the local democratic processes in tackling issues such as climate change, not to mention the coronavirus crisis. Hard decisions will need to be made and councillors are well placed to manage these in an equitable and locally-specific way," said Cahill.

"We have a huge interest in making sure well-funded local government is at the centre of government formation; and the current coronavirus crisis is showing just how important effective local government is."

"I will be working hard to ensure the highest quality representation continues in a challenging environment," said Cahill. "I am determined to leave the AILG in a different space to where it was, and to modernise it. Effective and representative local leadership is needed now more than ever."



*AILG's Vice President Cllr Anne Colgan (left) and President Cllr Mick Cahill pictured with Women's Local Government Network representatives – Tara Farrell, Deputy CEO of Longford Women's Link, Catherine Lane, Women in Local, Community and Rural Development Officer with the National Women's Council of Ireland, and Cllr Elisa O'Donovan, Limerick City & County Council.*