

FIRST RESEARCH PROJECT TO GIVE IRISH COUNCILLORS A VOICE

The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) at Maynooth University (MU), in collaboration with the Association of Irish Local Government, is now undertaking a dedicated piece of research on the role of the councillor in the 21st century. The project is set to generate interesting findings on the emerging priorities for councillors on capacity-building, innovation and decision-making.

Councillors in the 21st century perform multiple roles – they are legislators, civic leaders and decision-makers. At the same time, they're expected to be form-fillers, information conduits, fixers and problem-solvers.

While some research has been carried out in other jurisdictions on the wide-ranging and changing roles of councillors, similar research has been redundant in Ireland.

The independent research study *'The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government'* forms part of a two-year strategic partnership between the AILG and MU and the ICLRD to advance AILG's Professional Policy, Research and Advocacy Programme. The study aims to gain first-hand insights into the changing roles of the councillor to enable the AILG to better respond to members' needs.

The project was launched at the AILG's annual conference (in March 2022), and it is envisaged that the findings will provide a comprehensive profile and enhanced understanding of the multiple roles performed by councillors.

The research will also explore challenges and opportunities facing councillors as they execute their statutory and representative functions, and it will examine the impacts of structural reforms and the potential for further innovations in Irish local government.

INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARKING

As study results are generated, they will be presented in future briefings by the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), and the Irish data will be benchmarked against international findings. The researchers anticipate:

- Authoritatively documenting the roles councillors play and how they perceive their changing roles.
- Exploring the impacts councillors' roles and functions have on their personal, social and family lives.
- Identifying barriers and/or opportunities with respect to councillor retention and recruitment.
- Garnering councillors' views on local government reforms and reconfigurations – past and possible.
- Identifying councillors' needs in respect of continuous professional development (CPD).



The research study forms part of a two-year strategic partnership between the AILG and MU and the ICLRD.

This briefing will be of interest to elected members and to public representatives at all tiers and jurisdictions. It should also be of interest to those who work with councillors, including local authority staff, partner agencies and those involved in training and capacity-building.

CONTEXT AND RESEARCH OVERVIEW

As the national representative body of the 949 elected members of Ireland's 31 local authorities, the AILG is a networking, policy development and training resource for councillors. It advocates on their behalf at national and EU levels.

In order to advance an evidence-based approach to its work, with and on behalf of its members, the AILG has formed a strategic partnership with Maynooth University. The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) is one of the university's research centres.

It is a north-south-US inter-university partnership, a core objective of which is to strengthen the policy and operational linkages between central, regional and local policymakers, and

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among officials and practitioners, involved in spatial planning and social and economic development across the island of Ireland.

The ICLRD is undertaking this independent study on the 'role of the councillor in the 21st century' under the aegis of Maynooth University. This research envisages an extensive and scoping study among councillors and enables them to reflect on their experiences of what it means to be an elected councillor.

It invites them to offer recommendations on how they can best serve citizens and communities and optimise their roles in contemporary local government. The study will provide insights into why councillors' roles are changing, putting forward recommendations as to how councillors can be better supported in optimising the multiple roles they perform.



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Following the completion of the questionnaire, MU researchers Caroline Creamer, Dr Brendan O'Keeffe and Prof Brian Donnellan will conduct interviews and convene focus groups with a sample of councillors and other key informants. The research findings will inform AILG's work programme for the coming years, including its roll-out of training and capacity-building actions.

RESEARCH PROVENANCE AND OBJECTIVES

In 2018, researchers at the University of Birmingham

published two seminal studies: The 21st Century Councillor and the 21st Century Public Servant. These qualitative studies effectively illustrated the roles councillors and officials play in public policy, and they documented the ways in which roles are constantly evolving.

Several councillors participated in the in-depth interviews, and these generated rich datasets that captured the many hats worn by councillors to fulfil their representative and legislative roles.

The study documented how councillors perceive themselves and how their electors, among others, perceive them; highlighting many of the challenges faced by councillors in achieving an appropriate work-life balance.

This study and other research have identified barriers and

opportunities associated with retaining councillors, recruiting new blood and promoting more diversity in council chambers.

Councillors in Ireland identify with messages from the University of Birmingham research and other studies.

Consequently, they have advocated, through AILG, for an Ireland-specific survey of their membership to gauge councillors' experiences, perceptions and recommendations in respect of optimising and enhancing the roles they play.

This study aims respond by generating an authoritative dataset of councillors' views. A core objective of the research is to give a voice to councillors – it is not just about councillors; but rather it has been devised and conducted with their assistance.

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SCOPING LITERATURE REVIEW

In response to the AILG request for an independent study on the role of the 21st century councillor in Ireland, Maynooth University undertook a scoping literature review to ground the study and refine its objectives.

Among the issues arising from the literature review, which the study proposes to explore in the Irish context, are the following:

- How councillors act as links/bridges between citizens and democratic institutions.
- Relationships between councillors and citizens /communities.
- Central government and EU influences on local government and the work of councillors.
- Governance arrangements and councillors' interfaces with other decision-makers; and
- Councillors' training and capacity-building needs.

The study also deals with other issues that are more specific to Ireland.

TWO STRANDS OF RESEARCH

The research has two main strands; firstly, a bespoke survey questionnaire; and secondly, a series of interviews and focus groups with a sample of councillors and other key informants.

The survey questionnaire has been largely informed by the international literature and by a review of the Irish policy and governance context, including changes to the local government system over the past 20 years.

The online questionnaire, which was co-designed by Maynooth University and the AILG Executive Committee members, all of whom piloted it, covers the following five thematic areas:

1. The role of councillors.
2. Challenges facing councillors.
3. Implications of reforms and reconfigurations.
4. Possible innovations.
5. Tools and skills.

Each of these themes is explored through a series of closed-ended and open-ended questions. At this year's AILG Annual Training Conference in March a full session was devoted to it to provide a springboard for the research. This enabled councillors to

explore the issues in a plenary discussion, with several delegates completing the questionnaire on the day, while others followed up after the conference.

Maynooth University's team will draw on preliminary research findings to devise research questions for interviews with a sample of councillors. The researchers also aim to speak with some current and former Oireachtas (Houses of Parliament) Members, who have served in local government or have had close interactions with it.

Additionally, they look forward to speaking with some former councillors, including those who left of their own volition (rather than those who were not re-elected) in order to explore ways of improving councillor retention and recruitment, particularly among women, young people and members of ethnic minorities.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

While the primary data collection has just gotten underway in Ireland, similar studies in other jurisdictions attest to the merits of undertaking this type of research and the use of mixed methods. The literature review also notes that, across Europe, local government actors (councils, ministries, networks, professional associations) have introduced structural changes to support councillors and to encourage retention, diversity and efficacy.

This research provides an opportunity to test councillors' interest in introducing similar measures in Ireland. These could include, inter alia, by-elections (to fill vacancies); paid maternity/paternity leave; further cross-border collaboration (with local authorities in Northern Ireland); possible amalgamations or mergers; increasing or decreasing the number of councillors and having more (than Limerick) directly elected mayors.

Over recent years, several tenets of public policy – from EU and national government – have transformed the agendas of local authorities. These include, inter alia, the EU Green Deal and Ireland's Climate Action Plan, water framework directives, housing policies, and town and village rejuvenation initiatives. This research will explore the role of local government in delivering and shaping public policy in a fast-changing milieu.

The research also affords an

opportunity to examine some of the initiatives being taken by Irish local authorities, public bodies and training providers to support councillors in their work. It seeks to gauge their interest in participating in training programmes covering issues such as cross-border collaboration, climate change / environment / ecology, gender / equality / diversity, planning, social media, and well-being, among many other topics.

The research team envisages benchmarking the emerging Irish data against international datasets including those published by the Council of Europe and various academic institutions.

POTENTIAL TO TRANSFORM

While there have been several noteworthy studies of local government in Ireland, and councillors have contributed to many of them, this is the first study that is based on framing, articulating and analysing the experiences and views of the councillors, rather than any other cohort in local government.

Through the AILG, councillors have initiated and co-designed this research, and the study will give them a voice. It has the potential to be transformative for the AILG and to empower councillors, as the study will give them a robust and comprehensive dataset that is relevant to the work they do in 21st century Ireland. It will inform the Association's work programme for the roll-out of continuous professional development (CPD) and its representative roles at local, regional, national and EU levels.

For further information about this study, email AILG's Communications Officer Elaine Lynch e.lynch@ailg.ie

