

# FOUR IRISH COUNCILS REACH FINAL OF INNOVATION IN POLITICS AWARDS 2020

County councils from Clare, Fingal, Meath and South Dublin were the Irish finalists in the European Innovation in Politics Awards for 2020, for projects ranging from age-friendly housing, urban rejuvenation to community arts and playground facilities.

Commenting on the experience of participating in the European Innovation in Politics Awards, Cllr David Gilroy Mayor of Meath Council Council, said he found it very refreshing to be in a space in which people speak strongly and proudly about politics.

"I think this is something that's not done enough. Often politicians, in particular, are a bit shy about talking about politics in any kind of positive way. And I think that this is something we need to look at," he added.

For the second consecutive year Meath Council Council was a finalist in the Innovation in Politics Awards, in the 'Quality of Life' Category for its work to improve housing options for older people through its Age-Friendly Housing Technical Support Service.

This initiative, which was put in place to prepare for population ageing, is a direct action arising from the 'Housing Options for our Ageing Population' policy statement, published jointly by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and Department of Health in 2019.

## MEATH'S AGE-FRIENDLY HOUSING

Across Irish local authorities, Age-Friendly Housing Technical Specialists offer a service to ensure that older people have greater choice by developing a range of housing options suited to their needs.

These specialists act as the key points of contact for technical queries, specifically around designing for life and universal design principles. They progress referrals from local authority staff, external stakeholders and agencies, private sector developers, Approved Housing Bodies, social housing tenants,



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and private homeowners interested in rightsizing. Meath County Council facilitates the Age-Friendly Ireland Shared Service across local government.

In 2019 the council was a finalist in the 'Human Rights' Category for its Athboy Walkability initiative, which was led by Cllr Gilroy. Promoting Athboy as an inclusive and progressive town, he led an Age-Friendly Walkability Audit in the town to address accessibility. A unique aspect of

this audit was considering cognitive and sensory impairment as well as physical access issues.

**SOUTH DUBLIN'S NATURAL PLAYSPACE**  
South Dublin County Council was also a finalist in the 'Quality of Life' Category for its Natural Playspace Programme for children. With a population of almost 280,000, South Dublin County has one of the youngest populations in Ireland,



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and faces the same global challenge of sedentary lifestyles, decreased activity and increased childhood obesity.

The six-year project started with play locations close to children’s homes and children were asked what games they liked to play and what sort of spaces they liked most. Based on their feedback, the local playgrounds were converted to natural playspaces, developed in tandem with people in each neighbourhood, and children of all abilities were involved to help make them inclusive and welcoming.

South Dublin County Council had previously reached the finals in 2018 – the second year of the European Awards – in the ‘Democracy’ Category for its ‘300K – Have Your Say’ initiative. In 2017, SDCC’s Participatory Budget initiative, the first in Ireland, allowed citizens to vote for projects designed and submitted by citizens.

An additional €300,000 was provided specifically for this purpose. Citizens took part in facilitated workshops to generate ideas, identify community needs and develop supportive networks.

The initiative was rolled out under the brand name ‘300K – Have Your Say’ and attracted some 160 project submissions; 17 were shortlisted for public voting, of which eight (ranging from €5,000 to €120,000) were successful.

#### CLARE’S VISION SYMPHONY

Clare County Council reached the finals for the first time in 2020 in the ‘Education’ Category for its work on ‘The Vision Symphony’. This initiative of Clare Arts Office creates opportunities for visually impaired musicians, both nationally and internationally, who face specific challenges, particularly when it comes to memorising long passages of music.

The Arts Office partnered with Dave Flynn’s Irish Memory Orchestra (IMO) and

3L music in supporting seven musicians with various levels of visual impairments to participate in the research using the IMO’s memorisation techniques.

Clare Arts Office commissioned Dave Flynn to compose The Vision Symphony, which was performed by the IMO, joined by visually impaired musicians (including international musicians) and the Visionaries Choir, in Glór Theatre, Ennis, in October 2019.

Offering employment opportunities to those visually impaired musicians unable to professionally participate in an orchestra, the project received local, national, and international acclaim. And having won two awards at the 2020 All Ireland Community and Council Awards, the legacy continues with additional funding secured to develop elements of the symphony for younger visually impaired musicians to learn and perform with the orchestra in 2021.

#### FINGAL’S PLANS FOR BALBRIGGAN

Another first-time entrant for 2020, Fingal County Council reached the finals in the ‘Democracy’ Category for its work on ‘Our Balbriggan’ project, which saw 25% of the town’s population involved in the consultation process.

This led to the publication of the ‘Our Balbriggan’ Rejuvenation Plan and a commitment to deliver 93 action items with the aim of creating a vibrant, inspiring place, where residents to want live, relax, and work.



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According to Mayor of Fingal Cllr David Healy, the project focuses on community-driven renewal by strengthening relationships between society and the economy to create a more resilient, sustainable Balbriggan. “It is a great honour for Fingal County Council that ‘Our Balbriggan’ project was short-listed for a pan-European award.”

Fingal’s Chief Executive, AnnMarie Farrelly, said it is one of the council’s flagship projects and has already received awards in Ireland for the innovative way it harnessed the community to participate in the making of a plan for their town.

In 2019 the project won an Excellence in Local Government Award for ‘Best Practice in Citizen Engagement’ and an Excellence in PR Award for ‘Best Public Sector Campaign’.

‘COPING WITH COVID’ CATEGORY

Ireland’s four councils were among 90 finalists from 389 project entries across 22 EU countries. The winners for 2020 come from Austria, France, the Netherlands, Poland and Ukraine, as well as two winners each from Slovakia and the UK.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic a new category – ‘Coping with Covid-19’ – was established for 2020. Reflecting today’s most pressing issues, a citizens’ jury of 1,058 Europeans rated projects in the ‘Ecology’ and ‘Coping with Covid-19’ categories particularly highly.

Patricia Kahane, Co-Founder of The Innovation in Politics Institute, said: “The meaning of ‘innovation’ in politics cannot be decided by experts but only by citizens



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themselves. Cherishing our core European values – human rights, democracy, social balance and prosperity – should not be tied to party tickets. We all live and die by politics. We commend those who produce results by opening up new paths in politics.”

For the first time, the Innovation in Politics Awards took place digitally, and thousands of viewers throughout Europe followed the project presentations and their initiators across nine categories on YouTube.

Commenting on the changing context

for the Awards, Edward Strasser, Co-Founder and CEO of The Innovation in Politics Awards, said: “Since our Awards Finals in December 2019, politics has changed drastically. For months, politicians at all levels of governance and from across the political spectrum have been in survival mode.

“That’s why we are all the more impressed by the outstanding achievements of both the finalists and winners for 2020. Their political work will be of great value long after we have overcome the virus.”

**ABOUT THE INNOVATION IN POLITICS AWARDS**

The initiative was established in 2017 by the Innovation in Politics Institute, to give recognition to political work, showcasing it as an example of best practice for others.

The Institute’s mission is to support initiatives at any level of governance and across the political spectrum that break new ground, are creative and achieve results.

This Europe-wide organisation has offices in Vienna and Berlin as well as associated partners in Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

For more information visit [www.innovationinpolitics.eu/](http://www.innovationinpolitics.eu/) and for the full list of award winners and finalists for 2020 visit <https://innovationinpolitics.eu/en/awards/awards-2020/>

