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**2024 LOCAL
ELECTIONS.
125 YEARS
OF LOCAL
DEMOCRACY.**

Inside: To run or not to run - factors affecting councillors' decision-making in advance of the 2024 local elections ■ A Directly Elected Mayor for Limerick

Contents

PAGE 2

2024 local elections marking 125 years of local democracy in Ireland

In this piece marking 125 years since the first local elections in Ireland, Fergal O'Leary takes a look back at past elections and some of the changes and issues that have influenced the election process.

PAGE 6

To run or not to run – factors affecting councillors' decision-making in advance of the 2024 local elections

This article focuses on the challenges facing councillors, with a specific spotlight being placed on remuneration, recruitment and retention. The report presents data from the most extensive survey that has ever been undertaken among the elected members of Ireland's local authorities as part of the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) strategic partnership with Maynooth University.

PAGE 12

Finance matters: An analysis of council budgets ahead of the 2024 local elections

Dr. Gerard Turley and Stephen McNena present the most important takeaways for Budget 2024 following an analysis of the budgets of all local authorities in Ireland.

PAGE 18

A Directly Elected Mayor for Limerick

Aodh Quinlivan reflects on the long journey of introducing and implementing a Directly Elected Mayor (DEM) to Irish local politics, as the people of Limerick prepare to go to the ballot boxes to choose a DEM for the first time in June.

PAGE 21

Embedding accessibility in website and content management

This article is the third and final in a series from the National Disability Authority (NDA) which covers Local Authorities' obligations under the EU Web Accessibility Directive.

Thank you to all of our excellent contributors featured in this edition of Local Authority Times. To be involved in the next edition, contact us at latimes@ipa.ie

LOCAL ELECTIONS LOOM LARGE

This issue of Local Authority Times has a strong focus on the upcoming local elections that are to take place in June. 2024 will be a historic year in local Irish politics for many reasons, Limerick will be the first county ever to elect a Directly Elected Mayor which marks a great shift from tradition and is one of the biggest reforms that has taken place in regard to local elections and politics as a whole in Ireland.



2024 marks 125 years since the first local elections took place in 1899 and this issue features articles that look from the past to the present. As we gear up for the 2024 elections it is important to consider both the challenges and the positives of local government and the councillors that make up our councils.



Also featured in this issue, the National Disability Authority concludes their series of articles with a piece on embedding accessibility into websites and content and the obligations Local Authorities have in regard to this under the EU Web Accessibility Directive. We thank the team in the NDA again for their submissions and continued support.

My sincere thanks to all of our contributors, and our team in the Institute of Public Administration. If you would like to be involved in the next edition, do get in touch.

Alice Kelly, Acting Editor

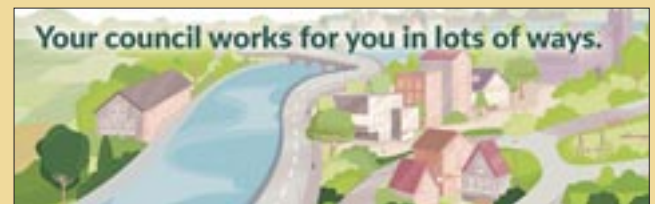
Your Council campaign

In January, Minister for Local Government and Planning, Kieran O'Donnell T.D. launched the "Your Council" campaign, to provide members of the public with more information about local government and the role of the Councillor. The campaign is a digital, social media and radio advertising initiative and gives an overview of the different responsibilities of local government and the key role played by Councillors in shaping communities.

As the remit of local government and Councillors is so varied, it is hoped that this campaign will encourage greater awareness among the general public of the crucial role played by Councils and Councillors. In particular the campaign will highlight the

Councillors' role in policymaking, governance and oversight, and as representatives within their local communities.

This campaign will see a national campaign roll out on radio, outdoor, social media and digital channels, using simple and informative language, and inviting the public to visit www.gov.ie/YourCouncil to find out more about the vital work local Councils and Councillors do, and how important it is to be informed and engaged with local government.



Specially commissioned painting marking the role of women in local politics

In the Custom House, Dublin, the Minister of State for Local Government and Planning, Mr Kieran O'Donnell T.D., unveiled a new work by artist and former Leitrim County Councillor, Sinéad Guckian, as part of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage's International Women's Day celebrations. The painting was commissioned by the Department-supported WoMeN's Regional Caucus, a group of 13 constituent member local authorities where there are insufficient numbers of women councillors to form a meaningful caucus at the county level.

unveiling follows significant funding announcements late last year, including a combined €435,000 allocated to political parties and local authorities to encourage greater participation of women, and those from diverse groups in local politics, along with other measures aimed at making the role of the councillor more accessible and sustainable.



Framework on Online Electoral Process

An Coimisiún Toghcháin, Ireland's independent electoral commission has published a Framework on Online Electoral Process Information, Political Advertising and Deceptive AI Content. The Framework comes in advance of the European Parliament, local authority and Limerick mayoral elections in June. The Framework is relevant to both online platforms and search engines as well as Ireland's registered political parties and election candidates. The Framework comes in response to concerns and evidence from a range of international bodies and



actors regarding the potential for false information, deceptive use of AI and other online activity to compromise the integrity of electoral processes and undermine democratic values and principles.

The Framework can be found here: <https://ec-cdn-live.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/app/uploads/2024/04/23163750/Framework-on-Online-Electoral-Process-Information-Political-Advertising-and-Deceptive-AI-content.pdf>



2024 LOCAL ELECTIONS. 125 YEARS OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY.

Fergal O'Leary

With political parties and independents gearing up for June's local elections, the coming weeks will witness a flurry of electioneering across Ireland by candidates and canvassers. The election of thirty-one new councils, which play a representative, policy-making and supervisory role, is fundamental to Ireland's system of local government.

2024 marks 125 years since the first local elections took place in 1899. Ireland and its society have of course been transformed since the late nineteenth century, and the country continues to experience considerable change. Indeed, much can happen over the five years between local elections, with new political and societal issues emerging for voters to consider at election time. Ahead of the big day on 7 June, this article briefly looks at past local elections, and some of the changes and issues that have influenced the election process.

Very brief history of local elections

Since the introduction of a two-tiered system of councils by the local government act of 1898, which was also accompanied by the extension of the franchise, twenty-five local elections have been held in Ireland. In the context of the unsettled national question, elections in the early decades of the twentieth century took place in a politically tense and violent atmosphere.¹ Over time, as the heightened tension and bitterness of this period receded, local politics and elections became more prosaic. Economic programmes from the 1950s were instrumental in modernising independent Ireland, with the societal change of the 1960s and 1970s perhaps reflected by attitudes towards local politics. Commenting on a 'good tempered and orderly' election campaign, the *Connaught Telegraph's* editor in 1974 stated: 'It is obvious that people have become more sophisticated and that politics in local elections are not now deemed as important and contentious as it used to be'.² Before 1953, local elections were supposed to take place every three years, but following legislative change, elections thereafter were to be held every five years. However, the holding of scheduled local elections was not always guaranteed. Since the early 1920s, no fewer than fifteen local elections have been postponed by governments for one reason or another; for example, the need to restructure local government or due to the proximity of other elections (e.g. a presidential election).³

Over the years, government decisions to postpone local elections have been met with a healthy scepticism from political opponents. There were different strands to the argument against a postponement. Critics often dismissed what they believed to be spurious claims by the government of the day, suspecting that political factors were at play. For instance, in 1984, there were heated exchanges in the Dáil as opposition politicians lambasted the government's decision. 'They [the local elections] are not being postponed because of the need for local government reform. They are being postponed because of the inept performance of the Government', argued one TD, while another

Lower image: Courtesy of The Irish Times

¹ For more, see Liam Weeks and Aodh Quinlivan, *All Politics is Local: A Guide to Local Elections in Ireland* (Cork, 2009).

² *Connaught Telegraph*, 13 June 1974.

³ For more, see Liam Weeks and Aodh Quinlivan, *All Politics Is Local: A Guide to Local Elections in Ireland* (Cork, 2009) and Peter Greene, 'Local Elections' in Mark Callinan and Justin F. Keogan (eds) *Local Government in Ireland: Inside Out* (Dublin, 2003).

asserted that the government knew it was on a 'suicidal course' if the local elections went ahead.⁴ Indeed, Aodh Quinlivan, UCC politics lecturer, describes local elections as 'mid-term contests ... typically used to give a bloody nose to the incumbent central government'.⁵ There was also a sense that postponing elections highlighted a contemptuous attitude towards local democracy. For example, during a 1972 Dáil debate, it was stated that frequent postponements diminished the status and standing of local councils, while in 1992, a political party official publicly denounced another postponed election arguing that 'democracy delayed is democracy denied'.⁶ However, a referendum in 1999, which gave constitutional recognition to the role of local government, ended the ability of governments to defer local elections as article 28A of Bunreacht na hÉireann now makes it clear that elections must take place every five years.

Reforms affecting local elections

In more recent decades, several reforms designed to modernise aspects of local government have significantly impacted councillors and, by extension, have had implications for local elections. For example, ahead of the 2004 elections, the dual mandate was scrapped meaning that members of the Oireachtas could no longer run in local elections; while in 2008, spending limits for local election candidates - in line with rules for general and European elections - were brought in.

The *Putting People First* era reforms also had a major influence. The abolition of town councils in 2014, which ended the second tier of local government, meant that some councillors no longer served on town councils and county councils. In addition, this rationalisation resulted in far fewer

seats for local election candidates to fight over as the total number of councillors fell from 1,627 to 949.

Reforms, in some shape or form, will always continue, helping to improve and modernise local democracy. For example, the possible introduction of gender quotas for elections, additional directly elected mayors or territory restructures will help keep local politics and elections vibrant. The right reforms are essential to maintain a modern and fit-for-purpose local government at the heart of the country's democratic system. And in the context of a rapidly increasing population, growing demand for public services and severe policy delivery challenges, there is a pressing need to look at fundamentally reforming local government in terms of functions, powers and resources.⁷

Issues at local elections

While local elections are considered 'second order elections', like referendums, European elections and presidential elections, they are never fully divorced from national matters. A range of local and national issues, to varying degrees, generate political excitement during campaigns. For example, concerns about local services and facilities (e.g. lack of playgrounds or adult education resources) often exercise the minds of voters, while in recent local election campaigns, austerity and housing were prominent national-level issues.⁸ Naturally, political priorities shift over time as different issues become relevant in people's lives. For example, it is widely expected that immigration will be a salient issue at the 2024 local elections, perhaps further fragmenting Irish politics.⁹

Turnout at local elections

The individuals elected as public representatives at local elections can have a significant bearing on communities through their statutory functions. However, despite the councillors' impact on local services, voter turnout at local elections is relatively low. Table 1 below shows that voter turnout at local elections has declined over the past fifty years from 62% to 50%.

Table 1	
2004	59%
2009	58%
2014	52%
2019	50%

(Source Ireland: A Directory 2024)

⁴ Dáil Éireann debate, 7 March 1984 and 22 May 1984.

⁵ Aodh Quinlivan, 'The 2014 Local Elections in the Republic of Ireland', *Irish Political Studies*, 2015: 30:1, 132-142.

⁶ See Dáil Éireann debate, 30 May 1972 and *Drogheda Independent*, 13 March 1992.

⁷ For an international perspective, see the latest monitoring report on the application of the European Charter of Local Self Government in Ireland. This report can be viewed here: <https://ailg.ie/european-body-issues-damning-report-on-irish-local-government/>

⁸ See Aodh Quinlivan (2020) The 2019 local elections in the Republic of Ireland, *Irish Political Studies*, 35:1, 46-60.

⁹ For more, see <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/immigration-moves-centre-stage-for-local-elections-as-fianna-fail-draws-up-new-policy/a876947808.html> and <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2024/02/10/why-is-ireland-no-longer-taking-immigration-in-its-stride-and-what-does-it-mean-for-the-next-election/>

However, there wasn't a continuous fall in voter turnout from one election to the next as the 1979 election saw an increase of 2% and in 2004 there was a jump of 9%. The lowest turnout was 50%, experienced at both the 1999 and 2019 local elections. This contrasts with general elections which have consistently attracted a turnout exceeding 60%. With local elections failing to capture the imagination of voters, in comparison to general elections, it perhaps highlights how some people perceive local government as having little impact in their lives.

Much has been written about the low voter turnout at the last set of local elections. Seán Ó Riordáin, Director of the Public Policy Advisors Network, observed that nearly one in two voters opted not to exercise their mandate in 2019, seeing it as part of a worrying trend that needs to be explored. If local government had responsibility for a wider range of service areas, he argued that more people might be interested in electing their local public representatives.¹⁰ There was also a clear rural-urban divide in the turnout figures for the local electoral areas. According to Aodh Quinlivan, the voter turnout in 2019 was 'significantly higher' in the rural parts of the country; the highest turnout recorded nationally was in Ballinamore (county Leitrim) with 66.85%, whereas the lowest turnout was in Tallaght South (Dublin) at 26.9%.¹¹

A host of factors influence whether people turn out to vote on election day or not. Adrian Kavanagh and William Durkan, academics at NUI Maynooth, have written about voter turnout in 'first order' and 'second order' elections in Ireland,

noting that the places and contexts within which voters live and work can lead to different turnouts in different areas. Some of the socio-economic, demographic, political and institutional factors which explain why turnouts in areas might differ are outlined in table 2 below.

Improving women participation

For representative democracy, whether at local or national level, to be more representative of society, ongoing work to improve participation is required. Efforts have been made in recent years to increase the number of women participating in the local elections which have borne positive results. For instance, the number of female local election candidates in 2019 was in the region of 560, an increase of around 7% on the 2014 figure. Of these candidates, 225 female councillors were elected in 2019 (23.7% of the total), an increase on the 196 (20.6% of the total) councillors elected in 2014. For 2024, it is hoped that this upward trend will continue as female representation in local politics is still quite low.

To this end, there have been calls by activist groups to introduce gender quotas for local elections, similar to quotas

¹⁰ Seán Ó Riordáin, S. (2019). Are we there yet? *Local Authority Times*, 22(1 & 2), 1-7.

¹¹ Aodh Quinlivan (2020) The 2019 local elections in the Republic of Ireland, *Irish Political Studies*, 35:1, p 50.

¹² See, <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/research/spotlight-research/getting-out-vote-what-influences-voter-turnout>

Table 2	
Factors usually associated with higher turnout	Factors usually associated with lower turnout
Older populations	Younger populations
Married people	Single or Separated people
Residential stability	Population mobility
Rurally based/Agricultural employment	Urban-based employment
Affluence/high levels of social well-being	Social deprivation
High levels of education	Low education standards
Proximity to the polling station	Distance from the polling station
High levels of political choice	Low levels of political choice
Weekend voting	Voting on weekdays

(Source Adrian Kavanagh and William Durkan, Maynooth University¹²)

for general elections.¹³ But quotas on their own are not enough to improve levels of female participation in local elections, addressing specific barriers and providing supports are also key. In recent years, the introduction of legislation enabling councillors to avail of maternity leave was an important step, along with new allowances for administrative support and personal security. Furthermore, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to improve female participation in the local election process, provides funding for information workshops and the provision of training and capacity-building programmes.¹⁴ The need to promote the participation of women, and marginal groups like travellers and migrants, in local democracy is clear, especially in the context of an increasingly equal and diverse society.

Conclusion

Local elections succeed in generating political excitement at the local level with campaigns fought on a range of issues. And 2024 will be no different. While individuals are elected to local councils to essentially oversee local administrative matters, national issues - like health, or housing or immigration for example - often have a bearing during local election campaigns. Commentators often view election results, rightly or wrongly, as a barometer of the fortunes of political parties before a general election.

Being able to elect public representatives who manage local affairs should never be taken for granted. However, many factors influence whether people cast their vote or not. Certainly, the trend of declining voter turnouts is concerning. While important work to increase the number of female candidates continues, there must also be a focus on trying to arrest the trend of low turnouts at local elections. People must be encouraged to pay greater attention to local election campaigns and to vote for their preferred candidates. A stronger local government, with devolved functions, powers and more resources, is perhaps the best way to achieve this.

A rapidly growing population, which has greater expectations in terms of public services, combined with acute delivery challenges in key policy areas, should support the argument in the coming years to reform and enhance Ireland's local government system. By following through on significant reforms, a government will strengthen local democracy and the ability of local councils to address issues facing communities. This can only help to reinvigorate public interest in local politics and increase participation in future elections.

¹³ See, <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/this-is-a-matter-of-urgency-renewed-calls-for-gender-quotas-to-be-brought-in-ahead-of-next-years-local-elections/a998718298.html>

¹⁴ See, <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/4f2f0-minister-odonnell-announces-funding-to-support-the-participation-of-women-and-diversity-in-the-2024-local-elections/>

RUN...

DON'T RUN...

Factors affecting councillors' decision-making in advance of the 2024 local elections

**Ms. Caroline Creamer and
Dr. Brendan O'Keeffe**

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Dr. Brendan O'Keeffe is Senior Research Associate at ICLR.D.

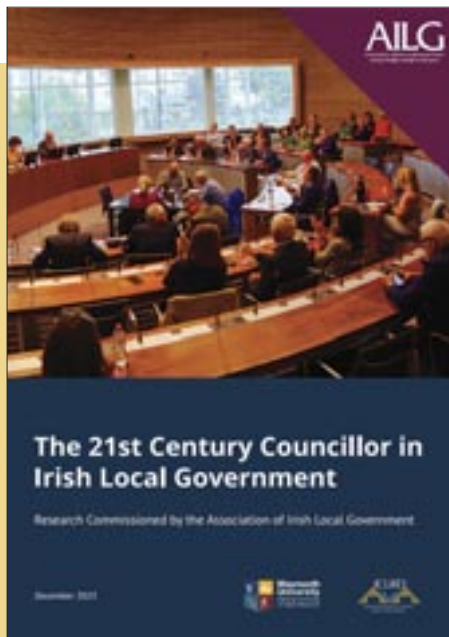


The importance of local government and of the multiple roles of councillors are increasingly recognised. The role of the elected official in the 21st Century is associated with much more than its statutory function; councillors are increasingly viewed as stewards of place, advocates for change, place-makers, entrepreneurs and place-based leaders (Mangan *et al*, 2016; Hambleton, 2015). This recognition is not always accompanied by the necessary powers to fulfil these functions effectively or the commensurate supports required by councillors to fully enable them to perform the functions envisioned in the European Charter of Local Self-Government - these deficits once again having been clearly highlighted in the 2023 report of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe (CLRAE) review of local self-government in Ireland (the first since 2013).

So, how do councillors perceive their role and the impacts of reform over the past decade? In 2021, the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) entered into a strategic partnership, with Maynooth University (MU), primarily focusing on policy development and awareness, research, and professional education and capacity building. One of the first actions under this strategic partnership was a research study to consider how the role of the elected official is changing in the 21st Century, and the implications of councillors' changing roles, not only for councillors themselves but wider local government. This study commenced in mid-2022 and concluded in November 2023. The research report was launched by Minister for Housing and Local Government, Darragh O' Brien on 31st January 2024 in the Mansion House. Also in attendance were Minister Kieran O'Donnell, Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning and Minister Malcolm Noonan, Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform. A copy of the report can be downloaded [here](#).

Methodology

Targeting all 949 councillors in Ireland, the core objectives of this research included, from a councillor perspective, a stocktake of the changing context of the role of the councillor and the range of challenges and opportunities currently impacting and shaping the role; an assessment of the impacts of the *2014 Local Government (Reform) Act* in terms of the resulting reforms and structural and operational changes, particularly as they affected the role of the councillor; a review of how the evolving international, European and national policy agenda is impacting on the workload of the councillor; and to ascertain what additional tools / skills-sets are required by councillors to enable them to continue to deliver effectively for their constituents. In speaking to the rich content and timeliness of this report, Cllr. Gail Dunne, President AILG, said, "This research highlights the indispensable role Councillors play as the voice of the citizen. As a national representative body for councillors, the report findings will help us to inform and strengthen AILG's Learning and Training Development Programme and support councillor well-being.... it is vital that we equip our members with the knowledge and insights necessary to excel in their roles now and into the future."



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In undertaking this research on the theme of *The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government*, Maynooth University and its research centre, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), employed a mixed-methods approach to the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. As this research focuses on the role of the elected official, it was critical, from the outset, that the councillor’s voice, experiences and attitudes were captured at every stage.

The remainder of this article will focus on the challenges facing councillors, with a specific focus being placed on remuneration, recruitment and retention. These challenges were raised consistently across the online questionnaire, interviews and focus groups, and have potential impacts for the upcoming local elections.

Remuneration

Whilst it was not originally envisaged as such, the role of the 21st Century councillor has evolved into a full-time role. Many sitting councillors have made that decision to commit to the role on a full-time basis, but others have decided not to, or they have been unable to do so for a multitude of reasons - ranging from family to career goals to current pay and conditions. While welcoming the increased remuneration that has been provided in recent years, following the publication of the Moorhead Report (2020) and the associated overhaul of the way in which councillors are remunerated, they note that they continue to receive part-time pay for a full-time job. As flagged in the Moorhead Report, the role of the councillor requires a significant commitment of time and effort; with this having grown exponentially as a consequence of the 2014 local government reforms, public policy priorities in areas such as climate change mitigation and increasing citizen

expectations. Unsurprisingly, there is a growing recognition that the role is more demanding and complex than ever before and that there are growing challenges and needs around capacity, skills and remuneration - all of which are inter-related. These factors are, in turn, considered critical to future recruitment and retention (as discussed below), and enhancing diversity within the councillor base - in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. The following quotations from councillors, drawn from the questionnaire, interviews and focus groups, are emblematic of their sentiments in this regard:

“

‘Being a councillor is rewarding, but the role is demanding.... They work long and unsociable hours, and while their remuneration has improved in recent years, it remains relatively low’

‘There are no fixed hours in this job. You can be contacted any time, day or not via a wide range of communication methods. And, contrary to what some might say, it is a full-time role paying a part time wage’

‘So, I’m actually in a position where I may have to give this up next year, because I can’t afford to live on the councillor’s salary, but I can’t do the full-time work and a part-time work and still remain sane’

”

It is increasingly clear that if elected members wish to see the role of councillor be formally recognised as a full-time career with appropriate remuneration, supports and capacity building / skill development, more powers must be devolved from central government, the profile of local councils and councillors need to be raised. There is also a growing necessity to achieve a better balance between the statutory and representative components of the role. In this regard, elected members were very clear that their commitment to the representational role, often criticised at national level, increases their capabilities to deliver their statutory functions. Ensuring that the balance and complementarity between these functions is better recognised, horizontally and vertically within the governance system, would improve relations with other levels of government and ensure councillors / local councils are taken more seriously. Getting to this point requires councillors to adopt a more assertive voice in terms of the critical role they (can) play. Whilst there is no indication of government policy recognising the role as full-time (with associated pay and pension rights) in the short- to medium-term, there is no doubt that this issue of categorisation is only going to become more significant.

Recruitment

Over the past few months, political parties and other groupings have been holding hustings and conventions to select candidates for the 2024 local elections. A number of independent candidates have also declared their intention to stand for election in June. Candidates include a mix of



incumbents and first-time hopefuls. Recruitment processes are affected, inter alia, by electoral geographies, inter- and intra-party competition and candidates' prospects and motivations. Other factors, such as gender, age and ethnic diversity are coming increasingly to the fore in shaping candidate recruitment. Would-be candidates are also taking advice from sitting councillors, and as the MU - AILG study reveals, most councillors are keen to encourage others to contest elections to what they perceive to be a rewarding, enjoyable and important role. At the same time, however, councillors are aware of recruitment challenges, and as the following graph highlights (drawn from the survey findings), the main barriers to recruitment are as follows: increasing workloads and changing voter expectations; the diminution of decision-making functions; and social media pressures. These factors are also barriers to councillor retention, and they are contributors to premature exits/resignations.

“

'I worked full-time as a councillor, which is less than minimum wage, for like six or seven years. That would have been around 16 grand at the time, and subsequently got married and have a child. So, it's impossible, absolutely impossible to live on that as a full-time wage'

'Poor remuneration, significant workloads, limited powers and frustrations with the operations of the local government system are contributing to councillors exiting the role and retiring early, and these factors are barriers to candidate recruitment'

”

“

'When the reality of the expectation within the role meets the reality of the remuneration, we lose a huge cohort of potential Councillors'

'I have been 23 years continuously a councillor. As the saying goes, I am proud to have served my Council and constituents, however on reflection of my time and potential earnings lost, it has been a selfish act in relation to my family. That is my biggest regret'

”

With respect to issues raised around social media abuses, recent research by AILG and Crime Management Group (CMG) (2023) documents how social media interactions are having adverse effects on recruitment (and retention), and it states, “it is clear that threats, harassment, and intimidation continue to affect councillors’ ability to effectively carry out their role and cause them significant concerns about their own safety and security, and that of their families” (2023: 6).

As noted earlier, councillors are poorly remunerated for the work they do, and their representative role is particularly under-valued. Yet, their representative role is time consuming, and while it is generally rewarding, the interfaces between councillors and those whom they represent can be testy and challenging. The survey findings reveal that councillors are busy people; they are expected to attend meetings, receive delegations, serve on community groups, deal with public bodies / officials and be on call 24/7. Consequently, they can be under inordinate time pressures, and it can be difficult for them to achieve a healthy work-life balance. These are significant considerations for would-be candidates, and as councillors reported, recruitment is affected by the following:

“

‘Over-work, too many meetings, reconciling day job with council meetings’

‘People expect more from you and for you to be on call 24/7; it is so hard to switch off’

‘Little support. Abuse on social media; Lack of progress on housing’

”

There is a widely acknowledged need to recruit more female candidates to contest the 2024 local government elections than occurred in 2019. Of the 949 councillors elected in 2019, just 225 (24%) were women, while 29% of candidates in 2019 were women. Over the past five years, political entities have used the co-option system to recruit more women to councils, while the *See Her Elected* (SHE) and *Women for Election* organisations have been working to support both the recruitment and retention of female candidates / councillors, and the survey findings point to the need for continued investment in their work and in supporting the growth and development of regional and county women’s caucuses. The Maynooth University – AILG survey findings also illustrate the need for other specific steps to enable and ensure greater

recruitment of females. The aforementioned growing workloads and the associated challenges in respect of work-life balance and the effects of social media on individuals and their families appear to impinge more on females than on males. The survey also reveals that the places (including the Council Chamber and offices) in which councillors do much of their work can be hostile environments for women, and experiences of chauvinism and gender stereotyping at all too common. As councillors reported:

“

‘Women appear to find it harder to enter politics. If you are otherwise gainfully employed, meeting times can cause issues... and men don’t want women taking their jobs, particularly if they are involved in a party’

Having a family (do not have a family if you want to be a councillor); Having a separate career (you will have to choose between the two eventually); Being female (it is far harder for women to succeed in this role, for a variety of reasons, including abuse from the public being a hell of a lot nastier, in my experience)

”

Retention

There has been notable media coverage of the TDs who have decided not to contest the next general election. Yet, little attention has been paid to a similar, if less pronounced, pattern among Ireland’s councillors, a growing number of whom have declared they will not be standing for election in June 2024. It is not yet possible to be definitive about the proportion of sitting councillors who will not be standing in this year’s elections, until such time as the deadline for nominations passes, but there have been several such announcements over the course of the past year. Young women, many of whom had been perceived to be ‘up-and-coming’ politicians, are proportionately over-represented among those who have announced they are quitting politics. Records published by Dr Adrian Kavanagh (Maynooth University) show that of the 126 councillors who were co-opted to local authorities since 2019, 16 have resigned from the role.¹ The graphic opposite, based on the MU – AILG survey results, indicate that the main drivers of premature exits, and by extension, the main barriers to retention are as follows: workload/time pressures; poor pay and lack of supports; and difficulties achieving a work-life balance.

The study findings point to steps that can be taken to improve both recruitment and retention, and these include:

- ✓ **Recognising the full-time nature of the councillor's role;**
- ✓ **Embracing digitisation in a way that empowers councillors (e.g. hybrid meetings);**
- ✓ **Ensuring citizens are better informed about councillors' roles, responsibilities and powers;**
- ✓ **Mainstreaming workplace norms and best practices, in respect of attitudes, language and behaviour apply in all places in which councillors exercise their roles;**
- ✓ **Providing systemic supports for childcare; Ongoing expansion of maternity and paternity leave supports; and**
- ✓ **Investing in more continuous professional development.**

Implications for the 2024 Local Elections

The survey findings reveal that remuneration, recruitment and retention are strongly inter-related. The under-valorisation of councillors' representative roles and their associated under-remuneration have caused pre-mature exits / resignations, and councillors report these factors are also barriers to candidate recruitment. The survey results indicate that gender is a factor, and women have been more adversely affected, than men have, by the challenges and barriers associated with recruitment and retention. These factors, and the perception that local authorities can be, as one councillor described them, 'old boys' clubs,' militate against diversity in respect of age and ethnicity. The survey findings confirm a desire among councillors for greater moves to promote diversity, so that the composition of Ireland's local authorities is more reflected of the electorate than is currently the case. While there are mixed views in respect of quotas, councillors are generally supportive of measures to ensure that councils are more family-friendly places in which dignity-at-work is universally applied.



Councillors' experiences point to the need for greater regulation, and more restrained use of, social media platforms, along with raising public awareness of councillors' roles - so that voters can engage more effectively and respectfully with all candidates. The findings also point to the importance of sustained investment in continuous professional development and ensuring new and incoming councillors are well informed, and better prepared and equipped for the multiple roles councillors are expected to perform. Reflecting on this, and where to next for AILG in responding to the report's findings, Mr. Tommy Moylan, Director, said "Councillors expressed a need for increased awareness of their roles, particularly in the face of an evolving local government landscape. They expressed the importance of training and continued professional development to further support them in their role as public representatives. The research highlights the importance of acknowledging and supporting councillors, addressing issues such as online abuse, gender disparities, and the lack of understanding from citizens and officials on the role of the Councillor."

This report presents data from the most extensive survey that has ever been undertaken among the elected members of Ireland's local authorities and, at its heart, is the councillors' voice. The role of the 21st Century councillor is evolving; and on its current trajectory demands equal recognition for both the statutory and representative roles of elected officials. In speaking to this process which has been unpinned by the councillors' voices, Cllr. Gail Dunne, President of AILG said, "The report underscores the indispensable role councillors play at the heart of local government, representing the voice of the citizen and the concerns of our communities. This was eloquently summed up in the report by one of the many contributions from our members who commented *"Despite all the challenges of being a Councillor, local democracy is vital, and the role of the Councillor is central"* - I think we should all remember this."

¹ Dr Kavanagh's blog 'City and County Council Members - Co-options and Changes since the 2019 Local Elections; can be accessed via this link: <https://adriankavanaghelections.org/2019/09/02/city-and-county-council-members-co-options-and-changes-since-the-2019-local-elections/>

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WHO GETS THE BIGGEST SLICE?

An analysis of council budgets ahead of the 2024 local elections*

Dr. Gerard Turley and Stephen McNena,
University of Galway



At the end of every calendar year, our local authorities budget for the following fiscal year. 2024 is no different but as it is an election year more attention should be given to these local budgets.

After analysing all 31 budgets, we can now present here the most important takeaways for Budget 2024. A summary of the spending and income data for the 31 local authorities is provided in the tables featured in this article.

Local Authority Spending

Total budget spend for 2024 is €7.4bn, or just over €1,400 per person, nationally. This is the largest revenue budget ever, and exceeds the 2023 figure by 10%, an amount in excess of the forecast inflation rate. For comparative purposes, after the 2008-09 economic crisis and the austerity era that followed, local authority spending was at its lowest level in the years 2014-15, at €4bn per annum. By 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the local elections of that year, the total day-to-day spend had increased to €5.2bn.

In contrast, central government spending this year is estimated to be €84bn, or over eleven times local government spending. This reflects the highly centralised nature of the Irish State, where the remit of local government is very limited. Despite the recent increases in the local authorities' budget, only about 8% of current public spending is by local government. This is one of the smallest shares amongst members states of the EU or OECD, revealing a preference in Ireland for very low levels of fiscal decentralisation.

Given that the economic rationale for local government is to represent differences in local conditions and voters' preferences, expenditure per person varies widely across the 31 local authorities (see 1A). The highest spend per person is in the four Dublin local authorities (€1,590) and in some small rural councils such as Leitrim County Council (€1,494) and Longford County Council (€1,492). As was the case five years ago at the last local elections, Kildare County Council (€955), Meath County Council (€945), and Galway County Council (€895) have the lowest spend per person. Although narrowed by equalisation grants from central government, these differences reflect both local circumstances and political choices.

Since the last local elections, the increase in local government budgeted expenditure nationwide is 43% (see 1B). Whereas some councils saw a change less than inflation - the smallest increases all in the West of the country, by Roscommon County Council (32%), Donegal County Council (27%), and Sligo County Council (17%) - others recorded changes greater than inflation, with the largest increases by Louth County Council (62%) and Meath County Council (68%). Whereas Sligo County Council's relatively small increase is explained by its precarious financial position, at the other end of the scale Meath County Council's relatively large increase can be explained as it came from a relatively

low base i.e. it had the lowest spend per person in 2019, at only €635. At a more granular level, the increase in expenditure on housing by the 31 local authorities during this five-year period is 66%, when inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) was running at about 20%. This reflects the importance of the housing issue, not just for local authorities but also central government and society at large.

In terms of the functions of local government, of the eight expenditure divisions listed in the annual budget, spending on Housing & Building, and Road Transportation & Safety together account for 57% of the total estimated budget. This covers maintenance of local authority housing (including traveller accommodation), housing supports (via HAP and RAS programmes), homeless services, upkeep of local and regional roads, public lighting, traffic management, road safety and others. Given the current housing crisis and the primary role that local authorities have in providing housing services, the high level of expenditure on housing is not surprising. While aggregate spending on housing by the 31 local councils is about 38% of total day-to-day spending, the range is very wide (see 1C). In the high-density urban councils (e.g. Dublin and Galway City Councils) expenditure on housing accounts for over 40% of recurring spending whereas in some of the more rural councils (e.g. Donegal, Monaghan, and Roscommon County Councils) it is less than 15% of the budget spend.

Local Authority Income

The increase in expenditure by the local authorities was largely financed by big increases in grants & subsidies from central government. During the period 2019-2024, central government grants to the local authorities increased by a whopping 85% (in nominal terms). Mainly specific-purpose grants, these paid for a plethora of local authority services, and once again, primarily in housing and roads. Expressing central government grants per local authority resident, the variation is large, from highs of €920, €879, and €871 to Leitrim County Council, Longford County Council, and Monaghan County Council respectively, to lows of €421, €409, and €363 for Cork City Council, Kildare County Council, and Meath County Council, respectively (see 2A).

After central government grants, the second most important source of funding for local government is commercial rates, namely a tax on (the occupier of) commercial and industrial property. Partly reflecting the differences in commercial and economic activity across local authorities, this tax is known as the Annual Rate on Valuation (ARV). In 2024 it ranges from a high of over 0.27 by South Dublin County Council, Dublin City Council, Limerick City & County Council, and Waterford City & County Council to a low of less than 0.20 by Westmeath County Council, Meath County Council, and Fingal County

Council (see 2B). Ratepayers in councils with a relatively high ARV might wonder if they are getting better or improved services for their higher rates bill. It is important to remember that rates are used to balance the adopted budget as is required of Irish local authorities and municipalities worldwide, as a budgetary rule to prevent profligate spending and ensure fiscal discipline.

What may come as a surprise to taxpaying households, a much less sizeable source of income for local authorities is the annual tax on (the owner of) residential properties, in the form of the Local Property Tax (LPT). In total, the LPT accounts for only 7% of total local authority revenue. Once again, there is a wide variation in the LPT share of total income across local authorities, with rural local councils relatively more reliant on the LPT/equalisation payment than the larger urban councils (see 2C). For example, whereas Leitrim, Roscommon, Sligo, Longford, Donegal, and Monaghan County Councils have LPT/total income shares of 15% or higher, in Galway City Council and the four Dublin local authorities the LPT/total income share is 5% or lower.

In terms of the LPT rate, as in previous years the big difference is between the four Dublin local authorities that continue to cut the annual rate and the majority (22 of 27) of

the other local authorities that use their taxing powers to increase the LPT rate annually, and in many cases (12 of 22) by the maximum permissible amount of 15%. The years 2023-24 also saw changes to the LPT system, including a move from the 80% retained / 20% pooled to 100% retention, and a new funding allocation model with an increase in the LPT baseline of €75m, to €428m.

As the local elections approach and candidates knock on doors and canvas on social media, it is time to inform ourselves of the key spending and tax decisions taken at local authority level. The outcome of these decisions is reflected in the local authority budgets. Budgets are valuable statements and deserve our attention between now and the local elections this summer. In the meantime, we encourage you to check our www.localauthorityfinances.com/ website to find the 2024 budgetary data, disaggregated by council, services, and revenue sources. There, voters can see how local councils spend tax revenue and grant income. After all, the purpose of elections is to decide how taxes should be spent on public services. The 2024 local elections will be no different.

*A shorter version of this article was published as a RTÉ Brainstorm piece in February. It can be viewed [here](#).

Table 1 Local Authority Spending, 2024

Council*	1A Spending per person, €	Council**	1B 2019-2024 spending change, % increase	Council*	1C Housing spend/ total spend, %
Dublin^	1,590	Meath	68	Dublin^	42
Leitrim	1,494	Louth	62	Galway City	41
Longford	1,492	Clare	59	Kildare	37
Mayo	1,461	Laois	58	Louth	37
Clare	1,457	Kildare	57	Wicklow	36
Waterford	1,439	Wicklow	56	Cork City	34
Galway City	1,438	Carlow	54	Meath	31
Tipperary	1,395	Longford	54	Carlow	31
Monaghan	1,373	Fingal	53	Laois	29
Kerry	1,348	DLR	50	Wexford	27
Cork City	1,303	Monaghan	48	Westmeath	27
Cork County	1,273	Kerry	47	Kilkenny	24
Carlow	1,255	Mayo	46	Waterford	23
Laois	1,239	Tipperary	45	Kerry	23
Louth	1,229	Leitrim	44	Cork County	21
Westmeath	1,124	Galway County	44	Sligo	21

Table 2 Local Authority Income, 2024

Council*	2A Central government grants per person, €	Council**	2B ARV	Council*	2C LPT share of total income % ^^
Leitrim	920	Waterford	0.2891	Leitrim	20
Longford	879	Limerick	0.2797	Roscommon	17
Monaghan	871	Dublin City	0.2770	Sligo	16
Tipperary	809	South Dublin	0.2760	Longford	15
Mayo	788	Carlow	0.2700	Donegal	15
Laois	734	Wexford	0.2530	Monaghan	15
Waterford	726	Longford	0.2521	Offaly	14
Carlow	670	Kerry	0.2450	Cavan	14
Clare	624	Monaghan	0.2445	Tipperary	12
Cavan	623	Leitrim	0.2436	Kilkenny	12
Louth	619	Sligo	0.2415	Westmeath	12
Westmeath	603	Clare	0.2390	Galway County	12
Dublin^	577	Mayo	0.2350	Carlow	12
Kerry	546	Donegal	0.2320	Waterford	12
Sligo	542	Kildare	0.2268	Mayo	11
Cork County	540	Roscommon	0.2250	Laois	11
Offaly	538	Laois	0.2217	Wicklow	11
Roscommon	535	Cavan	0.2211	Wexford	10
Galway City	505	Offaly	0.2198	Kildare	9
Kilkenny	501	Louth	0.2191	Meath	8
Donegal	494	Galway City	0.2170	Kerry	8
Wicklow	477	Wicklow	0.2170	Louth	7
Wexford	437	Galway County	0.2087	Cork City	6
Galway County	436	DLR	0.2077	Clare	6
Cork City	421	Kilkenny	0.2060	Cork County	6
Kildare	409	Tipperary	0.2015	DLR	5
Meath	363	Westmeath	0.1940	Galway City	5
All 31 Councils	664	Meath	0.1938	Fingal	3
		Fingal	0.1796	South Dublin	3
		Average (mean)	0.2323	Dublin City	2
				All 31 Councils	7

Source: 31 Annual Adopted Budgets 2024

* Limerick City & County Council is not listed in this column as it operates HAP on behalf of all 31 Councils

^ The four Dublin local authorities are combined due to the shared services between the four Councils

** Cork City Council and Cork County Council are not listed in this column due to the 2019 boundary change, and the incompleteness of the rates revaluation

^^ The LPT amounts here include any equalisation grant to and any local adjustment by a local authority

Note: DLR = Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown

The Local Government Gallery

What has your local authority been up to recently? Our Gallery highlights the work of local government across the country. To be featured in the next edition, email your photographs to latimes@ipa.ie

Waterford City and County Playful Streets Initiative

Healthy Waterford and Waterford Sports Partnership along with key stakeholders including Waterford City and County Council, Ready Steady Play, Sláintecare Healthy Communities, Waterford Libraries, Waterford PPN, Community Safety Partnership and CYPSC have launched the Playful Streets Initiative for 2024. Building on last year, The Playful Streets Initiative encourages children to play outside, making exercise fun and easy, while at the same time building stronger communities. It is a low cost and easy way to create play spaces within housing estates and green spaces. Residents' associations and community groups can now fill out an expression of interest form to run a Playful Streets event in their own area.

Wonder Walking Trails launched in Waterford City and County

The 'Wonder Walking Trails' have been launched in Waterford which are self-guided walking routes which include points of interest ranging from regionally important buildings like churches to more modest buildings, reflecting the architecture and cultural heritage of the everyday. The map provides user friendly information on the points of interest with interpretative text illustrated by a combination of images and drawings. The map also includes a scavenger hunt to get people out there analysing their streets and looking at them in a different way. These trails have been produced by the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, The Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage, in association with Waterford City and County Council.



Deputy Mayor of Waterford City & County, Cllr Declan Doocey pictured with from left Jane Wales National Built Heritage Service, Cllr John Pratt, John Beattie, Architectural Conservation Advisor, Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage, Edel McWeeney-Moran, CEO EZxploring, Rosemary Ryall, Executive Conservation Officer WCCC. *Photo courtesy Nathan Burkey Photography*



Mayor of Waterford City & County, Cllr. Joe Conway pictured at the launch of the Playful Streets programme 2024 with Eoin Morrissey, Waterford Healthy City & County Coordinator, Ovi Matiut, Local Development Officer, WCCC, Lauren Walsh-Kett, Active Cities Officer WSP, Jessie Griffin, Waterford Libraries, Éabha, Aaria and Jade Kinsella-Browne, JJ Taylor, WCCC, Margaret Collins, CYPSC, Muriel Tobin, Waterford PPN and Eddie Mulligan, Community Safety Partnership Coordinator, WCCC. *Photo courtesy Noel Browne.*

Riverfest Limerick 2024

Limerick are set to host their annual Riverfest festival for its 20th anniversary celebration on the May Bank Holiday weekend. Thousands of people are expected to descend on the city to enjoy Limerick's biggest weekend of the year and soak up the different kind of energy that makes Limerick unique. Many activities are taking place as part of the festival including BBQ competitions, kayaking, dragon boats, angling, rowing, and boat tours.



Sara Granda and Polina Shatkina of Fidget Feet launching Riverfest Limerick 2024. *Photo courtesy Arthur Ellis.*

Offaly wins Best Communications Initiative/Innovation Award at LAMA Awards

Offaly County Council won the Best Communications Initiative/Innovation Award in the Collaboration and Leadership Initiative at the recent LAMA Awards (which recognise excellence by Ireland's County Councils). The award was given for the council's 'STEAMing Ahead: How Offaly's Kids are Shaping our Rural Future' project. The initiative celebrates community and councils working together and it aims to equip young people with essential skills that make them more employable and adaptable to the ever-evolving job market.



L-R, Megan Cronly, Offaly County Council Libraries, David Spain, A/Head ICT, Offaly County Council, Jackie McIntyre, Senior Executive Librarian, Offaly County Council Libraries, Ray Bell, Head of Broadband / STEAM Innovator, Offaly County Council, Dean Hodge, STEM Educational Officer, Offaly County Council and Cllr John Clendennen, Cathaoirleach of Birr Municipal District. *Photo courtesy Hu O'Reilly.*



Laureate na nóig Patricia Forde, Cathaoirleach of Ashbourne M.D. Cllr. Conor Tormey and Executive Librarian and Events Programmer Eve Morrisson. *Photo courtesy Meath County Council.*

Meath County Council libraries encourage everyone to 'Get Lost in a Good Book'

Libraries throughout Meath took part in Ireland Reads, a campaign to get the whole country reading the lead-up to the national day of reading on Saturday, February 24. Irish libraries have teamed up with publishers, booksellers, authors, and others for the campaign, which is part of the government's Healthy Ireland programme and aims to celebrate reading and all the benefits it can have for well-being and enjoyment.

Opening of new Naas Library and Cultural Centre

Kildare County Council were delighted to host a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the official opening of the new Naas Library and Cultural Centre. The official opening marks the completion of a 4 year conservation, renovation, and construction project of this modern state-of-the-art library and cultural centre. This transformative project was part funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund as part of Project Ireland 2024, with an initial €4.4million allocation contributing towards the design, construction and fit-out of the library. Naas Library & Cultural Centre comprises 1,194.77 sqm of indoor space and 1,055 sqm of outdoor public space. The new library offers study and workspaces, with WiFi and printing facilities, as well as meeting rooms that can be booked by individuals or community groups. There is also a gallery space for art and cultural exhibitions.

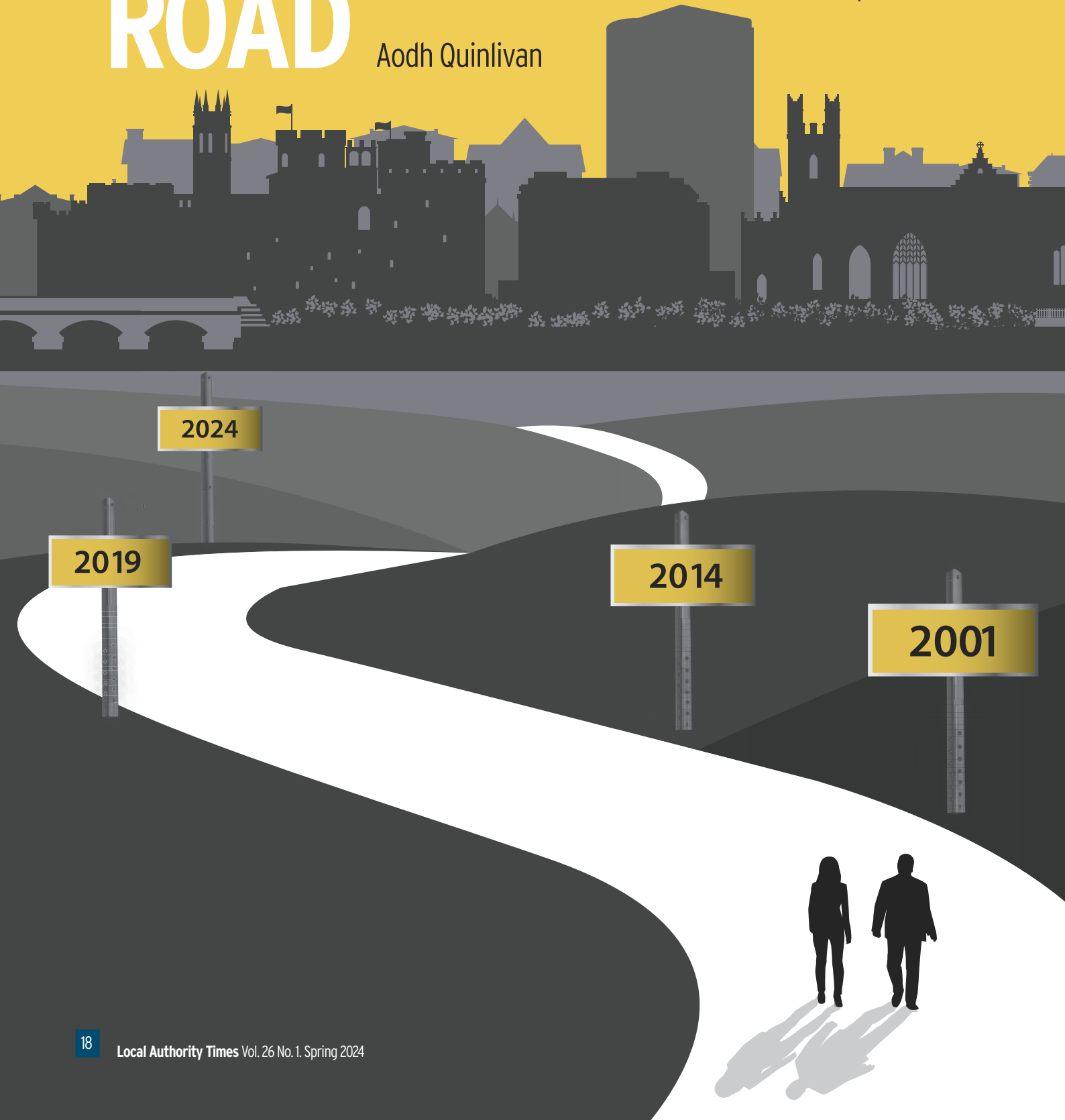


(L - R): Gillian Allen, A/County Librarian, Cathaoirleach of the Naas MD, Cllr Bill Clear, Cathaoirleach of the County of Kildare, Cllr Darragh Fitzpatrick, Sonya Kavanagh, Chief Executive, Kildare County Council. *Photo courtesy Kildare County Council.*

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

Aodh Quinlivan

Local government history will be made in Limerick on Friday 7 June. For the first time in Ireland, the people of Limerick will go to the ballot boxes to choose a Directly Elected Mayor (DEM).





How did we get to this point? To paraphrase Paul McCartney, the road has been long and winding. We have been alluding to the introduction of DEMs in Ireland for well over 20 years; in fact, legislation was passed in 2001 under Minister Noel Dempsey, to introduce DEMs across the country, for a five-year term, with executive powers from the 2004 local elections. The 2001 act was noteworthy for its lack of detail about the precise functions of the mayor. These issues were never clarified, and, in a dramatic shifting of positions, the government repealed the directly elected mayor proposal two years later. The matter was put on hold until 2007 when a coalition government was formed with Fianna Fáil, the Green Party and the Progressive Democrats. That government pledged to introduce a DEM for Dublin with executive powers by 2011. In April 2008, Minister John Gormley published a Green Paper, which contained a useful and well-framed discussion of the directly elected mayor issue. Alas, by the time the government left office nearly three years later, no White Paper had been produced and none of Minister Gormley's reform ideas had seen the legislative light of day.

It was a further three years before the issue of DEMs came forward again in legislation, this time under Minister Phil Hogan's Local Government Reform Act, 2014. The legislation proposed the holding of a Dublin plebiscite on the issue on the same day as the 2014 local elections. However, the legislation included a provision that each of the four local authorities which constitute the Dublin metropolitan area would firstly have to individually adopt a resolution in favour of holding the plebiscite. Three of the four Dublin local authorities comfortably adopted resolutions in favour of the plebiscite, but Fingal County Council, as it was fully entitled to do, did not and that was the end of it.

That is, until 2019 when it was announced that there would be local votes or plebiscites on the matter in Cork city, Limerick and Waterford, with Dublin to get a Citizens' Assembly as an initial step. Limerick said, 'yes' by 52.4% to 47.6% while Cork and Waterford narrowly said 'no'.

So, what can we expect to see in Limerick? Sticking with the winding road analogy, it was Moliere who wrote - 'It is a long road from conception to completion.' The road in Ireland towards a DEM has been filled with potholes and obstacles but a lot of work has been done in the past 20 years. In that sense, Limerick was not starting with a blank page. Following the 2019 plebiscite result, an Implementation Advisory Group (IAG) was formed, and it delivered its final report to government in October 2020. The report recognised that the establishment of a DEM with executive functions in Limerick City and County Council would represent 'a significant and profound reform of local government in Ireland.' The IAG also strongly recommended that the role of elected council should not be diminished; the DEM would be accountable to the council, rather than the other way around. The government signed off on the general scheme of the proposed Limerick legislation in April

2021 and asked the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage to undertake detailed pre-legislative scrutiny. Thereafter, the pace slowed and the final draft of the Local Government (Mayor of Limerick) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill, 2023 was only brought before the members of Dáil Éireann in December 2023. Having passed through both houses of the Oireachtas, it was finally signed into law by President Michael D. Higgins in March 2024, three months before the mayoral contest.

At the heart of the Limerick legislation is the establishment of a three-pillar structure comprising the DEM, the elected council and the Director General (formerly the Chief Executive). Reflecting the recommendation of the AIG, the reserved functions of the council will not be altered, and the DEM will be answerable to the council. Significantly however, there will be a transfer of executive functions from the Director General to the DEM. Speaking in November 2023 in University College Cork at the annual public lecture series of the Centre for Local and Regional Governance, Dr. Bríd Quinn stressed the opportunity that Limerick has to change the Irish local government landscape but cautioned that the 'co-habitation' between the councillors and the DEM and Director General and the DEM will require adaptability from all.

Until we loosen the vice-like grip of centralisation which continues to suffocate local autonomy, will a Limerick DEM really be able to shine and make a meaningful difference?

The Limerick DEM will have a five-year term of office, with a two-term limit, and may be assigned up to five staff members of Limerick City and County Council by the Director General. A new role of *Príomh Chomhairleoir* replaces that of *Cathaoirleach* who will chair the elected Council and act as its speaker. The Limerick Mayoral and Government Consultative Forum will facilitate formal engagement between the DEM and central government by way of regular meetings. Interestingly, the DEM can be removed from office. The initial step is a 'removal notice' signed by at least two-thirds of the elected members of Limerick City and County Council. In the legislation, the grounds stated for removal are that:

- (a) The DEM has engaged in stated misbehaviour;
- (b) The DEM has (i) failed to a material extent, without reasonable cause, to perform his or her functions, and (ii) such failure is of an extent which is likely to materially

impede the effective performance by Limerick City and County Council of its functions.

A special meeting of council will be convened to consider the removal proposal and the DEM will be entitled to address the elected members. If at least three-quarters of the total number of members vote in favour of the removal resolution, the Minister is notified. The Minister will then appoint a panel of at least three people having knowledge of or experience in local government, human resources or management. The panel will consider the removal resolution and make a recommendation to the Minister. This may result in the Minister issuing a removal order for the DEM.

The Limerick DEM experiment is fascinating for those of us interested in local government and local democracy. Limerick has a unique opportunity to lead the way and set an example for the rest of the country to follow. However, Limerick is also the guinea pig for a mayoral model that has taken a quarter of a century to implement. This will bring pressure and intense scrutiny. As Minette Walters memorably wrote in *The Scold's Bridle*, 'I am only interested in beginnings for there is so much hope at the beginning. The end has no merit to demonstrate how badly that hope was misplaced.' We may be at the beginning of a new dawn for local government in Ireland or we may be guilty of grafting an unnecessary mayoral layer on top of a weak and dysfunctional system. In 2023, the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CLRAE) produced a damning report on local democracy in Ireland, citing intense centralisation and tellingly noting: 'There are no signs that central government supervision is about to be relaxed' and 'the range of responsibilities handled under local self-government is clearly fewer than in most European countries.' Until we loosen the vice-like grip of centralisation which continues to suffocate local autonomy, will a Limerick DEM really be able to shine and make a meaningful difference? For now, it is appropriate to maintain a level of hope and, as Helen Keller noted: 'Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence.'

Dr. Aodh Quinlivan is a senior lecturer in the Department of Government and Politics at University College Cork. He is the Director of the Centre for Local and Regional Governance (CLRG) and served as a member of the Expert Advisory Group to the Dublin Citizens' Assembly.

STEPS TO EMBED WEBSITE ACCESSIBILITY

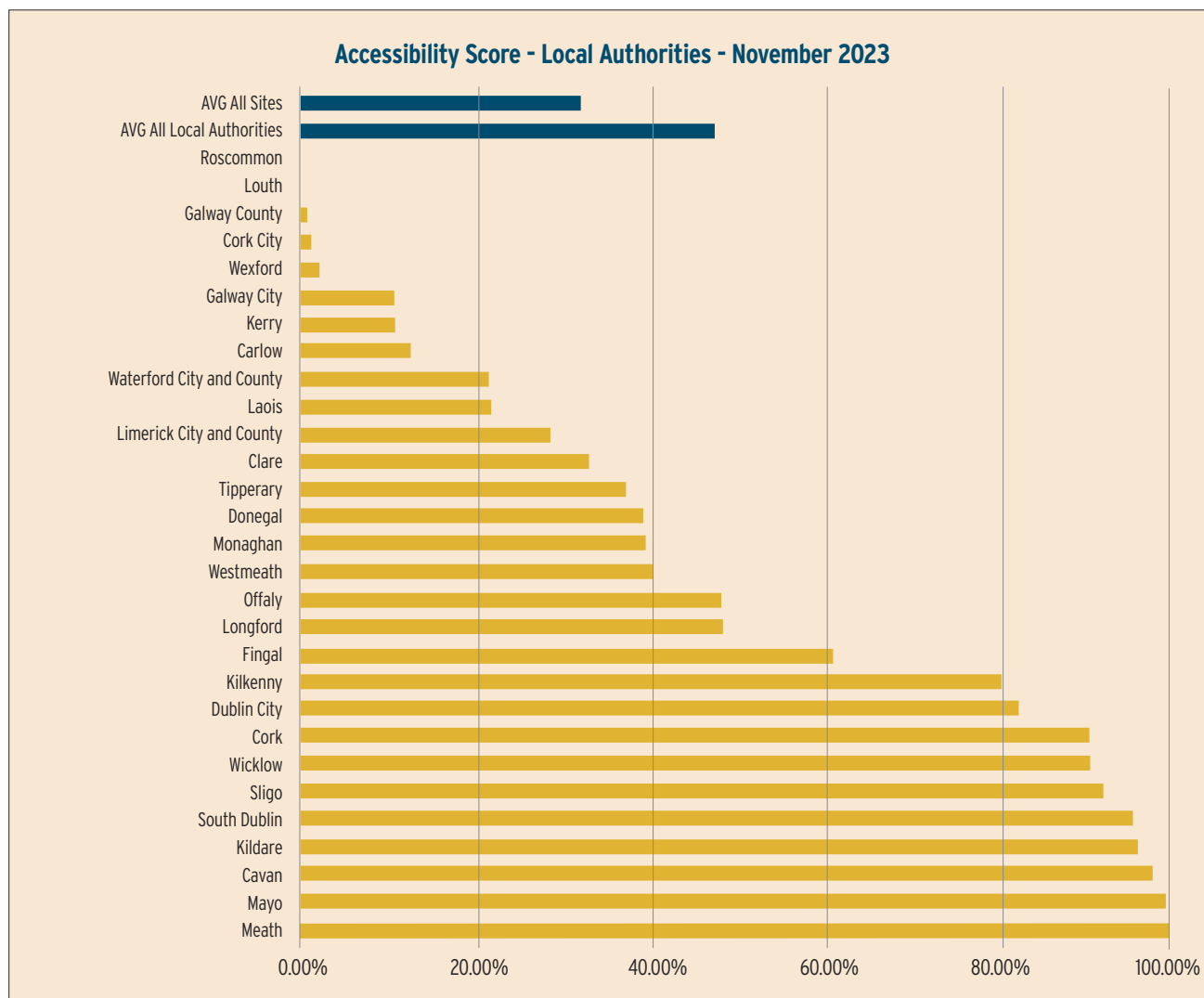
This article is the third and final in a series from the National Disability Authority (NDA) covering Local Authorities' obligations under the EU Web Accessibility Directive.



Local Authorities continue to improve their compliance with the EU Web Accessibility Directive and provide a more inclusive online experience for their staff and customers with disabilities.

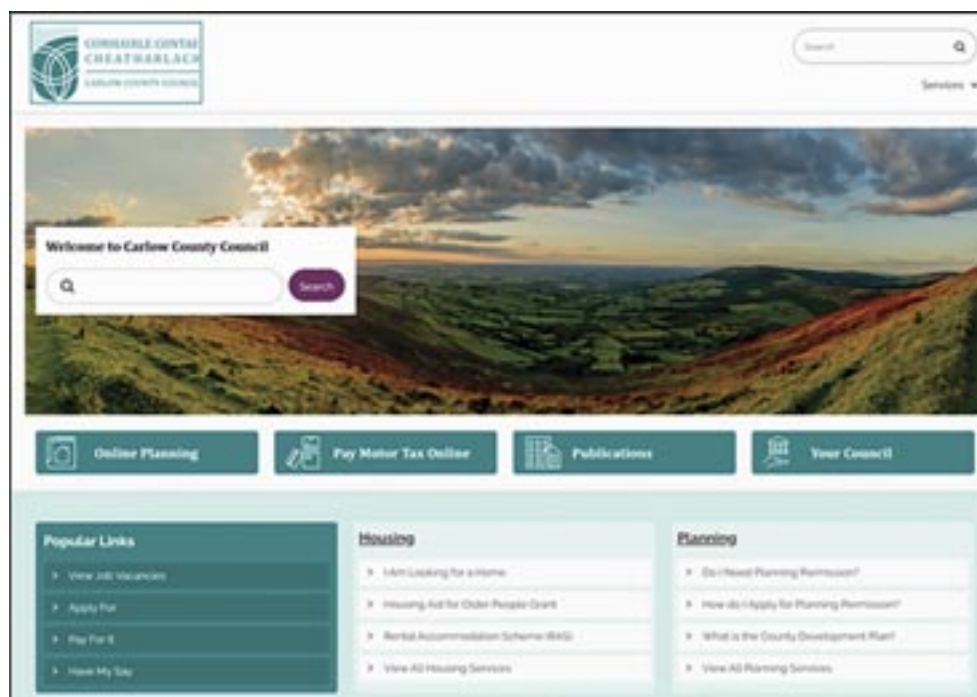
According to the National Disability Authority's (NDA) latest web accessibility monitoring report for 2023, more Local Authorities than ever have started to address accessibility on their corporate websites. Dónal Rice, Head of Monitoring in the NDA for the Web Accessibility Directive (WAD), notes:

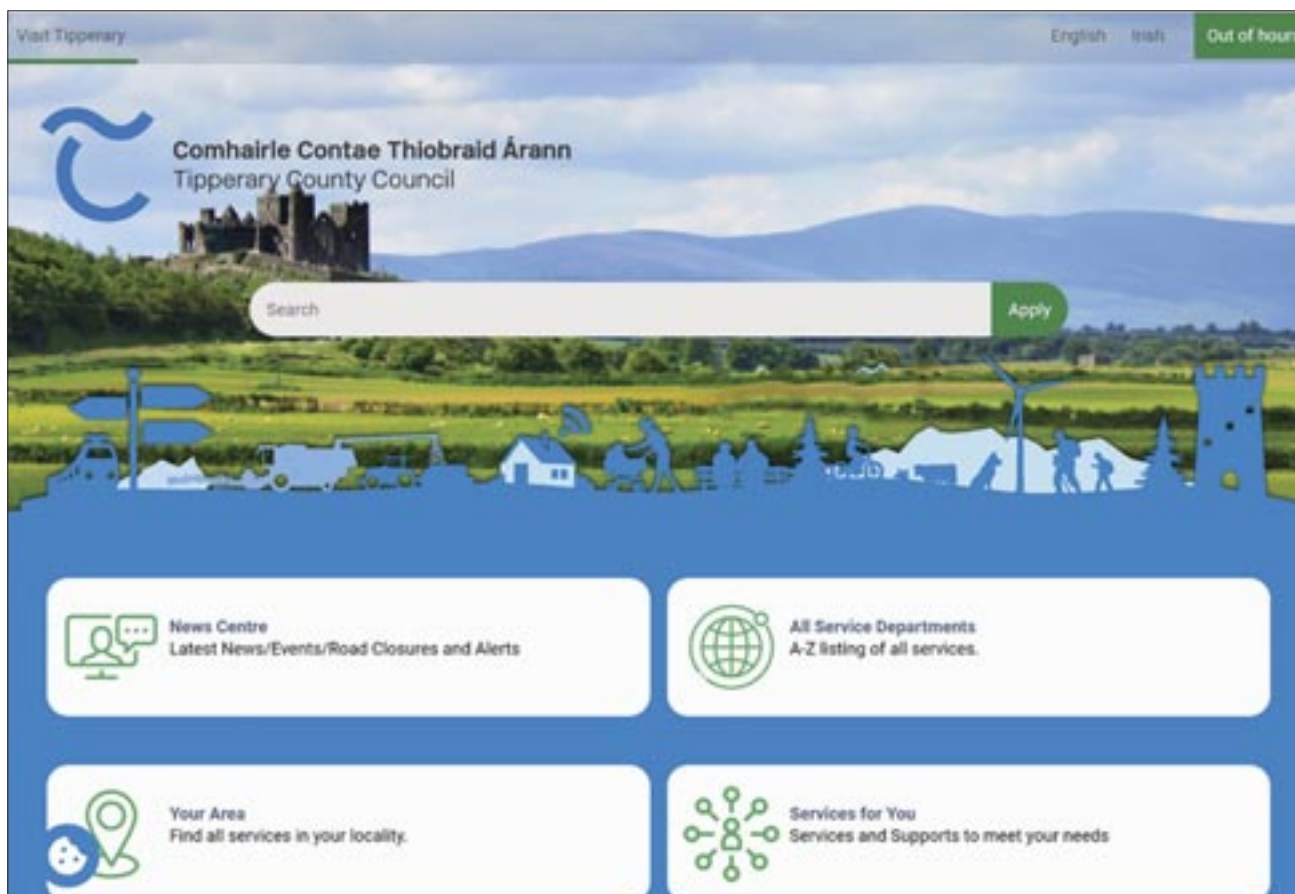
"We saw a greater number of Local Authorities improve their level of compliance with the EU Directive in 2023 and reduce the number of accessibility errors on their sites".



The higher the score, the more accessible the website is.

Many Local Authorities are making a real effort to improve compliance of their corporate website. "Our monitoring of public sector websites allows us to see in real-time when improvements are being made to a website. Just a few weeks ago we saw a significant reduction in the number of errors on the Carlow County Council website as their web team pushed through fixes to the live site."





The Tipperary County Council website also received a special mention in the NDA's monitoring report. This website was the only Local Authority website subject to a detailed "In-depth Review" by the NDA in 2023.

"While this website is not perfect", Dónal explains "its code-base - which is based on an open-source Drupal project with Local Authorities from the UK - is reasonably accessible and is likely to continue to improve over time. It is important that new website projects aim for maximum compliance from the outset with the accessibility standards required under the Directive."

Focus on accessibility from the beginning

The NDA's web accessibility monitoring report for 2023 found that over 50% of Local Authority corporate websites still have a low or very low level of compliance.

NDA research suggests the cost and effort to retrofit accessibility on an existing website or service can be between 10 to 30 times that required to make it accessible in the first place.

So, the key to managing accessibility is not just responding to

monitoring results. It is about managing accessibility across the key stages of any website or content project. This holistic approach to accessibility requires it to be considered on an ongoing basis, not just a point in time, and managed across all stages of the development and management of websites.

The NDA's WAD monitoring team recommends that communications, web and IT teams in Local Authorities carry out a relatively easy number of steps to embed accessibility in the management of their customer facing websites and applications. If they take these steps, they will see a gradual and sustained improvement in their levels of compliance:

- Embed accessibility as early as possible in a website's development - don't leave it until the end to check!
- Include compliance with accessibility standards as a mandatory requirement in the procurement, design and development of all websites and content in formats such as PDF (see section below on **procurement**)
- Don't take developers' and third-party providers' claims around accessibility at face value. Learn how to test and confirm compliance yourself! (see section below on **simple accessibility tests**)

The accessibility standards required under the EU Web Accessibility Directive are the EN 301 549 V3.2.1 (2021-03) "Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services". These are based on the more commonly known Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA.

Inaccessible PDFs

Inaccessible PDFs account for the largest number of accessibility issues on Local Authority websites. The NDA suggests that a Local Authority's efforts in remediating PDFs are best focused on fixing the most important, high traffic PDFs first.

Three questions to consider when prioritising which PDFs to make accessible first are:

- Does this content need to be in PDF in the first place - can it be published in accessible HTML on the site?
- Is it of relevance to customers, such as information on a service, or how to get in touch with a department within the Local Authority?
- Is it of particular relevance to persons with disabilities?

Procurement

When drafting a call for tenders to procure website content or services, it is crucial to include accessibility within the selection criteria, technical specifications and award criteria.

These include:

- Assessing a supplier's accessibility capacity by requesting a statement of their commitment to accessibility and examples of past accessibility work or references from clients
- Defining accessibility requirements in the **Technical Specifications** by referring to the current European harmonised standard EU Web Accessibility Directive EN 301 549 V3.2.1 (2021-03) "Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services" which is broadly equivalent to the more commonly known Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA. Complying with this standard is one way to meet the mandatory technical requirements of the Web Accessibility Directive
- Adding accessibility requirements to **Award Criteria** which go beyond the minimum accessibility standards mentioned above. This could include user testing of the solution with a diverse range of users and persons with a disability
- Evaluating the deliverable against the accessibility standards referenced in the Technical Specifications. This may require specialist knowledge, or you can use a range of simple accessibility tests

- Include accessibility in your Service Level Agreement so that any new upgrades or developments on the site don't compromise your level of accessibility

Simple accessibility tests

The NDA recommends not signing off on any deliverables until you can confirm they meet the required accessibility standards.

You can check the accessibility of your website today. Choose a page on your site and do the following to get a reasonable indication if the standards for accessibility have been followed:

- Does the page have a page title and is it correct?
Page titles are shown in the window title bar or tab in browsers. They are the first thing read by screen readers and help people know where they are.
- Do images have alternative text?
Image alternative text ("alt text") is a short description that conveys the purpose of an image. Alternative text is used by people who cannot see the image.
- Is there good contrast between the colour of the text and the background?
Test both using a tool like the Colour Contrast Analyser <https://www.tpgi.com/color-contrast-checker/>
- Can you operate interactive elements (such as buttons, links) using the keyboard only by pressing the tab or arrow keys?

You can also conduct a whole host of automated checks on any website with free tools such as the axeDevTools, or WAVE browser extensions.

Where can I receive more information?

To receive advice on your website's compliance with the Directive, please contact the National Disability Authority at webaccessmonitor@nda.ie.

The NDA has also provided training and webinars on a wide range of topics including PDF accessibility, managing accessibility and conducting your own accessibility testing. Recordings of these training sessions are available on the NDA's Centre for Excellence in Universal Design website: <https://universaldesign.ie/communications-digital/web-and-mobile-accessibility>

Article authored by the National Disability Authority's EU Web Accessibility Directive Monitoring Team.

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GET INVOLVED.

We are always interested in your views, so if you have any comments, suggestions or ideas for topics that we should address in future issues, please do not hesitate to let us know.

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