

# MAKING HISTORY FOR IRISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

The newly-established Limerick City and County Council involves a change of identity and focus in order to marry urban and rural concerns and challenges, according to UL's Dr Bríd Quinn. Here she outlines the background to the first merger of city and county councils under the new local government reforms.

**W**e move forward together as one council, aware of the challenges, but facing the future with the optimism and confidence that all new beginnings bring," was the message of Conn Murray, CEO, at the inaugural meeting of the new Limerick City and County Council on 6 June 2014.

The University of Limerick's Concert Hall, a place of celebration and innovation, was an appropriate setting for the event with UL President Don Barry reminding the large gathering that "we have much to celebrate in Limerick city and county".

The new council results from the merger of the city and county authorities as part of what Minister Phil Hogan describes as "the most radical reform of local government in more than a century".

For Limerick city it marks the end of over 800 years of municipal government. For the county, it ends more than a 100 years of council leadership and involves a change of identity and focus for both, in order to marry urban and rural concerns.

Politically, the inaugural meeting was also a unique occasion. The 2014 Local Elections spawned kaleidoscopic party configurations and Limerick was no

exception. The inaugural meeting saw civil war legacies put aside with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael collaborating to ensure their party representatives were allocated leading roles and the significant representational responsibilities.

The remaining 15 elected members are drawn from Sinn Féin (6), Anti-Austerity Alliance (3), Independents (3) and Labour (3) so the left-right permutation will ensure that the new council is a forum for diverse perspectives.

However, political change is the only noteworthy aspect of the new council. Not for Limerick, merely a mechanistic merger.

Rather, the opportunity has been seized to create a new flexible organisation that reflects what is possible for an innovative local authority, albeit one created in an era of public service austerity.

## OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY

The reform themes of 'Putting People First', the document which shaped the Local Government Reform Act of 2014 underpinned the creation of the new local authority. The national reform strategy aims to maximise operational efficiency and enhance the effectiveness of democratic representation and Limerick is intent on



Limerick City and County Manager, Conn Murray presents the first Limerick City and County Cathaoirleach Cllr Kevin Sheahan (FF) with the chain of office at the inaugural meeting in the UL Concert Hall on 6 June. Cllr Kevin Sheahan received 27 out of 40 preferences. (Pic: Alan Place)

## LIMERICK MERGER

implementing these objectives in an innovative way.

The development of the new council has been chequered. Beset by decades of ad hoc rather than strategic development as well as complex social problems, the city and many of its environs needed a fillip. Problems besetting the county were of a different, but equally complex nature with the recession since 2008 intensifying problems of depopulation, de-industrialisation and deteriorating infrastructure.

Unresolved boundary problems had restricted the city's development with most retail and industrial development happening in suburbs, which were outside the city council's remit and rate-base. Limerick's problems were widely recognised and in 2010 Minister John Gormley, the then Minister for the Environment, established a committee to report on the most appropriate arrangements for local government for the city and county of Limerick.

The committee recommended the amalgamation of the city and county. Reactions were mixed, with Limerick City Council unanimously rejecting the proposal to amalgamate. Others, such as the Chamber of Commerce, saw a unified approach as the only way of securing Limerick's future.

The proposals of the Brosnan Committee dovetailed with the reform agenda of the new Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Phil Hogan, appointed in 2011. The 2011 election manifestoes of Fine Gael and Labour, as well as the subsequent Programme for Government, pledged reform of both central and local government and promised significant savings as a result.

The abolition of town councils and the merger of councils in Limerick (city and county), Waterford (city and county) and Tipperary (north and south) were touted as flagship projects. Limerick was the beacon and serves as a laboratory for comprehensive reform. In July 2011, the Limerick Reorganisation Implementation



Cllr Joe Crowley (FF), Leas Chathaoirleach, was elected with the same number of preferences (27 out of 40) as Cathaoirleach Cllr Kevin Sheahan (Pic: Alan Place)

Group (LRIG) was established to guide the process. A year later, special legislation was enacted to appoint a dual manager, Conn Murray, to lead the merger process.

### REGENERATION DIRECTORATE

A change management team made up of senior personnel was created. Joint Management Teams (JMT) of the city and

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Bríd Quinn lectures in Public Administration at the University of Limerick and specialises in local governance, public management reform and EU policies. She serves on the PSAI's Local Government Specialist Group and is a member of the Group of Independent Experts of the Council of Europe. From 2008-2014 she was Cathaoirleach of Limerick County Council's Audit Committee.

Prior to her career as an academic, she was a primary school principal. Long involved in local and regional development, she has carried out consultancy work in Ireland, Europe and Tanzania and has participated in a variety of EU research projects.

She is co-author (with Nicholas Rees and Bernadette Connaughton) of *Europeanisation and New Patterns of Governance in Ireland*, Manchester University Press, 2010. She has published in a range of journals (*International Journal of Public Sector Management*; *Regional and Federal Studies*; *Administration*; *Policy and Politics*; *Teaching Public Administration*) and contributed chapters to several edited books.



## LIMERICK MERGER



Cllr Kevin Sheahan addresses his fellow councillors and attendees at the University Concert Hall after being elected Cathaoirleach. (Pic: Alan Place)

county councils developed a set of strategic vision and values statements. Service unit plans for the directorates were prepared. A review of policies, procedures, processes and practices was undertaken.

Consultation was ongoing, particularly through the Joint Committee of Elected Members and the Joint Management and Trade Union Forum as well as with various stakeholders. The physical amalgamation of services started in 2013 so as to have a working system in place following the 2014 elections.

The amalgamation of the two organisations involves 11 merger programmes, 12 major change programmes and 11 innovation programmes which are being effectively rolled out and consistently evaluated. As a result, the delivery of services is being revamped, with a strong emphasis on citizen-centredness.

A new directorate for regeneration was created aimed at addressing underlying social problems as well as achieving physical regeneration. A broadly-based economic development committee is serving as a think-tank to maximise Limerick's potential.

The vision statements, the strategies and the merger processes reflect current international thinking on public

management reform and the need for a holistic approach. Such an approach underpins the Limerick 2030 strategy which was published in 2013. It is structured around three main elements – an Economic Strategy, a Spatial Strategy and a Marketing Plan – and provides an overarching framework for Limerick's development.

Thus, an innovative organisational architecture and a comprehensive strategy have been put in place to support the merger. Already, the approach is achieving results. Several investment announcements have been made, third level institutions are developing centres in the city and Limerick has been selected as a pilot site by Retail Excellence, Ireland.

### SENSITIVITIES EVIDENT

However, challenges remain. The merger involved combining two workforces whose practices and processes were alike but not identical. Similarly the range of services delivered and the budget priorities differed between the two authorities.

Sensitivities were also evident regarding the finances since the city's financial situation was straitened and its commercial rates were higher but convergence has already been achieved. The merger is being implemented in a context where local

authority staffing has been significantly reduced and valuable experience and insight has been lost through redundancy and early retirement.

Public reaction has sometimes been negative with complaints, for example, about the siting of planning services in the city centre. Scepticism also exists about the potential savings from the merger. In December 2012 Minister Hogan claimed that "the merger decision was made in the context of targeted savings of €15 million per annum in the local government budgets" but there is little evidence of such savings to date.

Political challenges abound. Like councillors throughout Ireland, Limerick's elected councillors face the challenge in the expanded role assigned to them by 'Putting People First' and the Local Government Reform Act (2014). Fundamental to 'Putting People First' is a strengthening of the role of councillors.

The 2014 Act places more responsibility as well as more decision-making and policy development powers and oversight duties on elected members, and local authorities will operate differently as a result.

However, in Limerick as elsewhere, these changes did not feature hugely in campaigns prior to the local elections. Neither did

this theme feature in the addresses made by party group leaders at the inaugural meeting. The creation of districts is another innovation resulting from the 2014 Act. Limerick has been assigned three municipal districts in addition to a metropolitan district which comprises the city area. The Act specifies that the districts will have responsibility for a range of functions with the full council making the major decisions.

### URBAN-RURAL CHALLENGES

A particular challenge for Limerick's new council will be the handling of specific urban and rural issues, since the cultures and concerns of the two parent organisations were quite diverse and the metropolitan and municipal structure may create tensions.

'One Voice, One Vision for Limerick' was a mantra which recurred during the inaugural meeting. A vision has been articulated, considerable reform has been achieved and during the meeting councilors of all political hues were of one voice in articulating their commitment to making Limerick a better place.

The new council has the institutional infrastructure and political potential to achieve that aim. Turning the positive rhetoric of the inaugural meeting into a progressive reality for the people of Limerick

requires courage, serenity and wisdom from politicians, officials and citizens.

Minister Hogan has stated that "the approach taken in the Limerick Implementation Plan sets a standard for

local government reform in all areas". Just as D-Day – 6 June 1944 – changed the course of history, so 6 June 2014 will become a significant date in the annals of Irish local government, particularly for Limerick.

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