

Cllr Bill Chambers Cathaoirleach Clare County Council

Cllr Ann Norton Mayor Ennis Municipal District

Oireachtas Members

Cllr Sean McPeake, President, Northern Irish Local Government Association

Mr Pat Dowling, Chief Executive Clare County Council

Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to welcome our guest tonight, Mr Simon Coveney, T.D. Minister for Housing, Community & Local Government to our Annual Conference tonight. We appreciate your coming Minister; you have had a busy day in that we know you were in Westport this morning with the planners so you have travelled a distance to be with us this evening. I have to acknowledge that you have been generous with your time as regards the Association ... you were present at our Autumn Conference in Gorey last October, and we have met you on a number of other pressing issues at short notice in the months since. As an Association we appreciate your making yourself as you head what is no doubt one of the busiest Departments in the whole array of Government.

Earlier this week we saw how you sorted out a bit of boundary bother between Kilkenny and Waterford. Here in Co Clare we have had the occasional bit of boundary issue ourselves. There a few years ago the Limerick crowd attempted to make a move on Cratloe and Clarecastle but we managed to fight that off. However if we run into any more boundary disputes we know who to call on to make sure that our frontiers are protected.

However on a more serious note we were glad to see that in your statement regarding the Kilkenny-Waterford issue you said that county identity was an important characteristic of Irish life. I think you have put your finger on something there. There is a trend to dismiss county loyalty as being something from the past, something that is associated with the GAA and not an awful else. However this is to completely under-estimate the place of the county in the Irish mentality. Meet any Irish person at home or abroad and the first question is “what county are you from?” And with the answer to that question comes a richness of culture and identity. Our counties have a powerful brand name which would be the envy of many public service agencies. If you were to start off with a blank sheet and tried to create the sense of identity enjoyed by our county councils you would spend a lot of money on marketing consultants to get the kind of visibility and identity that goes with our counties in modern Ireland.

Talking about boundaries brings us to the related question of planning and mapping out the future as to where Irish people will work, live and fulfil all their aspirations. We have been very pleased as an Association to engage fully with the early stages of the National Planning Framework which is being worked on by your Department and has the ambitious mission of mapping out the future of Ireland’s rural and urban areas for the next twenty years. Earlier this year through the training programme being organised by the AILG with your Department, more than 250 councillors from all counties had the opportunity to engage at first hand with the planners in your Department who are drafting the Planning Framework. The sessions which took place in Cavan, Athlone and Waterford were very much two-way a process. The councillors from all backgrounds – rural, urban and suburban – did not hold back in spelling out the issues which were being faced by their local communities. The sessions with your planners who, in fairness to them, were very receptive and open to what was being said by our members – were an excellent example of involving councillors with your Department at a very early stage in the creation of new and emerging policies.

For too long councillors were at the end of the chain when it came to being consulted on issues which would impact on local government. I think Minister you will find that if councillors are involved at an early stage you will find good will and good input from councillors and we would urge to encourage all divisions of your Department to follow the strong example set by your National Planning Framework team in terms of consulting with councillors early and often.

Earlier I mentioned the question of boundaries but we all have in the forefront of our minds another border issue of great consequence and that is epitomised by the word “Brexit” and

the issue of UK leaving the European Union. The AILG is taking a lead in the local authority sector in terms of engaging with “Brexit” in that we have planned a Plenary meeting of the organisation to take place in Newry in late May. This meeting will be attended by representatives from all the county and city councils in the State. We already have contacts with our counterparts in the North, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. And to welcome here tonight Cllr Sean McPeake, President of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. We will be asking Sean to contribute to our assembly in Newry and help highlight the local government implications of what will play out on the European stage over the next couple of years.

Some issues cross all boundaries and our day has focussed on a universal theme of local development and particularly rural development. Our programme began on a stirring note when Fr Harry Bohan, one of the great figures in the rural development sector in this country, issued a call to arms to support rural Ireland while there were still people there who with the right leadership and vision can bring new life to the fabric of our rural communities. He pointed out that there was a very real risk of an Ireland which will be made up of two cities, Dublin and Cork, a few provincial towns and vast almost unpopulated prairies in between. Some planners suggest that this is inevitable – that there is a gravitational pull towards the cities and this cannot be reversed. However Fr Behan says that this trend is not inevitable and that with proper regional planning there is a chance of bringing about the holy grail of effective regional development.

Our programme today has been focussed on the issues of rural development with this morning what one contributor from the floor spoke of as being an “exceptionally talented panel.” We had Fr Harry Bohan who left a big impression; we heard from Pat Dowling, new Chief Executive of Clare County Council who has great vision for this great County of Clare; and we heard from Pat McDonagh, founder and General Manager of Supermacs, who is the living embodiment of how to start a business from a base in the west of Ireland and take on the international brand names in the one of the most competitive markets in the high street.

Later this afternoon we had the charismatic Mr Pat Spillane who was here in his role **not** as a GAA pundit – although he fielded a few questions under that heading but in his role as the Ambassador for the Action Plan for Rural Development appointed by Minister Heather Humphreys to carry the message of rural development to communities throughout the country. As an Association we welcome the publication of the Action Plan for Rural Development and we feel that taken together with the National Planning Framework that it

will give all involved in local and national government a blueprint to work for a progressive future for our rural communities. Of course even the best plans need to be backed up by practical action and we were glad to hear from Noel Kinahan of Irish Rural Link and Harold Felzen who came over from Germany to outline to us a plan for community banking which might answer some of the worries about the withdrawal of banking services from many parts of the country.

While putting such emphasis on rural communities we are very mindful that as an Association we represent Councillors who work in suburban and in city environments. Indeed the figures published by the CSO yesterday show that the trend towards concentration in urban areas continues to grow. This is a reality which local government has to recognise. There are great communities and great people living in our cities and in our suburbs and they too deserve to be supported by the local government family in developing a sense of place and putting down roots in their new environment. Increasingly in Ireland the relationship between urban and rural is complex: take this location in Ennis on the corridor incorporating Shannon and Limerick. It is populated by a highly cosmopolitan community yet is within a short distance of the rural environs of the Clare countryside. Looked at this way it would appear that the Municipal District concept which has been in place since 2014 is a good fit for the interdependency of town and countryside. We are still within the first five year cycle of the 2014 reforms and there is a case for the new system to be given time to bed down.

Whatever about reforms one thing Councillors from all backgrounds are agreed on is the increase in the workloads and in the expectations of them in the public space. The Minister has listened to the case made by the Association for better support for councillors in their day to day work. We appreciate that it is a difficult ask at a time when there many competing pressures on public finances. However all we ask for is some flexibility within the parameters of what you have already announced. We are half way through the life of the current electoral cycle and we want to ensure that becoming a councillor is an option for everybody and especially is seen as a supportive environment for young people who want to do something for their communities through becoming a councillor.

So with that look to the future I want to re-iterate the Association's appreciation to you Minister for coming to our Conference and we look forward to continuing our engagement with you .....