

FIRST AILG FEMALE PRESIDENT AT THE FRONTLINE

Galway's Cllr Mary Hoade, incoming president of the Association of Irish Local Government, is impatient for Covid-19 restrictions to end so she can throw herself into achieving her policy priorities during her term of office. However, as the AILG's first female president tells Peigin Doyle, there's certainly plenty to focus on in the meantime.

Headford-based Cllr Mary Hoade, who represents Tuam Municipal District on Galway County Council, was elected President of the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) at its online AGM on 28 October 2020.

"I am a long-time admirer of AILG and I am really proud to be the first woman president," she tells 'Council Review'. Having first joined the AILG Executive in 1999, Cllr Hoade certainly brings a depth of experience and passion for advocacy that will serve the Association and its members well during her leadership of the organisation.

As the primary representative body for Ireland's 949 democratically elected members, the AILG offers councillors across the country's 31 county and city councils a vital hub for networking, policy development and training.

Although the new president and the AILG have a broad range



The whole area of rural planning needs to be looked at, especially when more local authorities are drafting their development plans, according to AILG President Cllr Mary Hoade.



AILG's President Cllr Mary Hoade and Vice-President Cllr John Joe Fennelly pictured at the Custom House, following their meeting with Minister of State Peter Burke, to discuss alternative recommendations on working hours and remuneration.

of issues to pursue, the Covid-19 pandemic has given them an immediate focus of supporting councillors to carry on their work in a time of tight physical restrictions. New ways of doing business, keeping in touch with constituents and communicating their activities have to be found and supported.

"This is a whole new element to our members' work as there are no physical meetings. Online communication is perfect if you can do it, but not all constituents can use social media. Yet there are problems that cannot wait, and so we are looking to provide our members with support for social media and remote working."

WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Following the launch of the Women's Local Government Network at the AILG Conference last March in Longford, the Association announced its commitment to help, assist and collaborate in the setting up of these networks around the country.



Members of the Women's Local Government Network, which was launched at the AILG Conference in Longford on 5 March 2020.

CLlr Hoade feels very strongly about this need to support greater participation by women in local government. “We need to increase the whole level of female participation in local government and on the AILG Executive Committee. At present, 25 per cent of local government councillors are women. We have difficulty with the retention of women; why do

government arena. (Sara Moorhead SC, a prominent barrister who has practised in Dublin for more than three decades, was appointed in June 2018 to undertake an independent review of the role and remuneration of councillors).

However, the AILG President says that more emphasis is needed in helping current female and minority councillors

in 2014, I changed our meeting times to 11am. Virtual meetings suit some people; so we could have blended meetings that are either virtual or hold meetings in person.”

She sees the establishment of local and regional women's networking caucuses as vital in promoting greater participation. There are a number of such networking groups already, in Dublin, Longford and Limerick.

“Women councillors need to come together. Getting that up and running in 2021 is the first priority. We put a number of practical proposals to the Department for regional female caucuses. These should be funded by the department to be effective. We have put ourselves forward to help that. Regional women's caucuses could tie in with our regional training days. It could be a practical, immediate measure.”

TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Training is another critical area for councillors, and AILG is currently working with researchers at Maynooth University to put together a policy and advocacy programme to be rolled out during future training events.

“The role of councillors has become much more complex. There is the whole area of social media. When I started, local radio and local papers were the ways of promoting what you were doing. People's level of expectation and scrutiny has changed as well.



The AILG started its second online training module in conjunction with the OPR at the end of November 2020, which will be followed by two further webinars scheduled for 22 January and 26 February 2021 respectively.

female councillors not run again or resign during their terms?”

The Moorhead Report¹ and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage have identified the need for measures in supporting women to take a greater role in the local

who are there now. “All the energy seems to be on getting women to contest, to go on the ballot paper but once the election is over the help stops.

“We need to do certain things to support women such as how we hold our meetings. When I became Cathaoirleach



“Online communication is perfect if you can do it, but not all constituents can use social media....so we are looking to provide our members with support for social media and remote working” – AILG President Cllr Mary Hoade

“With 72 new councillors elected since the 2019 Local Elections, we will offer induction training for new councillors to help them learn the basic procedures and how to be effective. The first induction training webinar took place in early December. Training is invaluable. The day you stop learning is the day you die.”

PLANNING REGULATION WEBINARS

The AILG also continues to work with the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) on the provision of training programmes on planning law and drafting city and county development plans, and to address issues such as climate change, which have made the planning process more complex.

These intensive online training programmes come at a critical time when elected members are reviewing their respective local authority’s development plans.

Rural planning policy, in particular, is something about which Cllr Hoade feels deeply. “I am very much a rural councillor, born and reared. The whole area of rural planning needs to be looked at, especially when more local authorities are drafting their development plans. It is becoming more difficult to get planning permission for a single rural house. There are so many documents you need to take

into account on drafting these plans.”

The AILG also started its second online training module for local authority elected

members with the first webinar taking place on Friday 27 November 2020. The other two webinars are scheduled for Friday 22 January and Friday 26 February 2021 respectively.

The aim of the webinar entitled ‘Implementation of the Development Plan and the Development Management Process’ is to confirm the legislative and regulatory position of elected members as regards their input to the development management process.

The webinar will highlight, when and where, it is appropriate for elected members to engage with such processes and how to maximise effectiveness. It covers two main topics, namely

‘The Role of the Elected Member in the Development Management Process’ (to be delivered by Deputy Planning Regulator, Anne Marie O’Connor), and ‘The Link between the Elected Members Plan-Making Function and the Development Management Process’ to be delivered by Niall Cussen, the Planning Regulator.

AILG PRESIDENT – CLLR MARY HOADE

Cllr Mary Hoade is the first female councillor to hold the position of the President of the AILG. During her 20 years as a Fianna Fail county councillor, Cllr Hoade has served as Cathaoirleach of Galway County Council and as Chairperson of the Regional Health Forum and Western Health Board.

She also served as a member on the Northern and Western Regional Assembly and on many local community organisations and local community development bodies.



Former president Cllr Mick Cahill pictured with Cllr Mary Hoade, following her election at this year’s AGM, held online for the first time on 28 October 2020.

The AILG has also revamped and relaunched its website www.ailg.ie.



Each 30-minute presentation will be followed by a 'Q&A' session, and questions may be submitted online throughout the course of the webinar. Elected members can register their interest by email to info@ailg.ie.

DEFINING THE ADVOCACY ROLE

Bringing the role of the councillor back to the forefront and making their voices heard is an ongoing aim of both the President and the AILG, and she says that they differ from the definition of the councillor's role as put forward by Sara Moorhead SC, in her report.

Moorhead recommended that councillors should be part-time workers engaged primarily on governance, compliance, oversight of services, community leadership and representation on external bodies as well as representing individual constituents.

"We do not agree with her views on the representation role of our members. Moorhead does not give the advocacy role sufficient consideration. There is a need to help very vulnerable people who come for help to their local representatives. We bring that knowledge and experience back inside the council chamber and we get better decisions and outcomes because of it.

"The time which Moorhead thinks that councillors should take to do their work [is too low]. I work up to 35 hours a week as a councillor. We are full-time councillors. It is very difficult to attend all the meetings you have to attend."

The AILG put forward alternative recommendations on working hours and remuneration during a recent meeting with Peter Burke TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning, and to also get an update on the Moorhead Report.

Outside of remuneration, Hoade also recommends non-financial supports for the councillor's role including supports for parents and carers, family-friendly processes and changes to meeting times.

NORTHERN IRELAND AND BREXIT

Cllr Hoade will be working to renew links with counterparts in the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) as soon as coronavirus restrictions are lifted.

"We need to work together with our Northern Ireland and UK counterparts in delivering shared services. I'm really looking forward to the challenges of taking that on. There is a lot of co-operation between local government in the 26 counties and N. Ireland, for example, Donegal has shared library services with Derry. We hope that early in the New Year we will have an online meeting with NILGA."

One of the first items on the agenda will be Brexit. "It is a real issue; it will have an impact on services from 1 January 2021. There is obviously a concern about the effects on local industry, commercial rates, jobs and crime, and also on local government. We will have to work in partnership across the border, and will be looking to keep our strong ties with NILGA and not to let Brexit affect that.

"There are a number of strands to our relations with NILGA. It is the same agenda – to put our elected representatives to the forefront in local government. It is about putting the power back onto our elected members.

"Collaboration on getting more power and functions devolved to local government is hugely important. We are envious of some of the powers and structures available to our Northern Ireland and UK counterparts.

"For example, their local authorities have a remit in local education and social services. We are always looking at local government situations in the UK and around Europe and we will be advocating for those functions in our local government."

Reference:

1. Sara Moorhead SC. *Independent Review of the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members*.