

# DONEGAL COUNCILLOR'S AILG PRESIDENTIAL PRIORITIES

Bringing power back to local government and ensuring that elected representatives are properly equipped to deal with the challenges they face are some of issues topping the agenda of the President of the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG). Cllr Nicholas Crossan talks to 'Council Review' about his priorities during his one-year term of office.

**D**onegal's County Councillor Nicholas Crossan, who was elected President of the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) at the AGM on 30 September 2021, became the first Independent elected member to hold the position of AILG President.

The Buncrana native, who is a past president of the Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland (AMAI), hopes the experience gained in that role will help guide him in his new position.

"As councillors, we have a long history of involvement in local government, and I have great respect for the contribution of the elected members in our democratic local government system. The AILG is a national representative body that represents and supports the role of our elected councillors. We are a strong voice for local communities through effective local government," Cllr Crossan says.

"Local government is a fluid situation. There are new rules and regulations and changes in the legislation and we must keep abreast of that and make sure the voice of the councillor always remains to the forefront on local government issues.

"I would like to see more powers devolved to local government. For example, planning powers have been eroded, and we need more say over housing issues. We have been elected and we have a mandate from the people. Councillors are closer to the people than the TDs and senators and councillors are the first point of contact."

The AILG President has highlighted that the increased expectations and demands place huge resource burdens on Ireland's local authorities. "Innovation, transformation and partnerships will be needed to meet our recovery,



*Cllr Nicholas Crossan says that local government needs to attract young community activists into local politics.*

growth and efficiency challenges."

He also believes strongly that local government needs to attract young community activists into local politics, and to integrate the many diverse communities now settling in Ireland.

"We must get new people from all communities on board, and we need a mix of experienced councillors to guide the newcomers on how things are done.

"Ireland is a diverse country and all new communities need to be represented. We must attract those community workers who have a passion for their areas, who want to serve the people of their areas and who will make a difference to those areas," he notes.



*Pictured at the NILGA Local Government Conference on 24 November 2021 in Bangor, Co. Down (l-r): AILG President Cllr Nicholas Crossan, MLA Minister Robin Swann; Junior Minister Gary Middleton and NILGA President Robert Burgess.*

## CROSS-BORDER PARTNERSHIPS

He is equally passionate about fostering co-operation with his Northern Ireland counterparts. Cllr Crossan has been busy renewing links with counterparts in the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and the Northern Ireland Association of Councillors (NIAC), building upon the good working relationship AILG has fostered with its sister associations in the North.

The Donegal Councillor was among those in attendance at the National Association of Councillors' (NI Region) AGM in October 2021 as well as the NILGA Local Government Conference in Bangor, Co. Down on 24 November 2021. Both events saw councils in Northern Ireland press for increased powers to help the country recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The cross-border working relationship between both Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council is a clear example of the value and importance of cross border relations.

Their co-designed Northwest Strategic Growth Plan, endorsed by both governments during a North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Plenary Meeting in 2016, alongside their emerging Northwest City Region Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan, can be considered outputs from soft cross-border co-operation.

Some key projects as part of this unique partnership included joint research on the potential impact of Brexit on the Northwest City Region and how a cross-border city-region can be shaped in light of the economic, political and social realities of Brexit.

## REVISED ROLE AND REMUNERATION

Following an extensive lobbying campaign by successive AILG Presidents and Executive Committees since 2014, there was finally a successful outcome to the review of councillors' remuneration last year.

This work came to fruition in May 2021 when the Government announced that an increase in pay had been approved by Cabinet following proposals presented by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien TD, Minister of State, Peter Burke TD and Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath TD, based on recommendations from the Moorhead Report.

The new pay scale will be equivalent to the Civil Service Grade 4 scale of pay, at around €26,000. The new remuneration structure will require all councillors' expenses to be vouched, with proof of purchase, according to Cllr Crossan.

While the new AILG President admits there is still some work left to do, the approval of these enhanced pay proposals is a welcome step in recognising the value and important role of local councillors. "It will ensure that our members have an appropriate remuneration, reflective of the important work and time commitment that they dedicate to their role as an elected member of their local authority."

However, Cllr Crossan foresees difficulties not just for councillors but also for council staff. "A lot of clarification is needed on the new vouched systems, with fear among councillors that there may be an error in expenses. The corporate





*Cllr Nicholas Crossan, AILG President, pictured with local government colleagues at the National Association of Councillors (Northern Ireland Region) Annual Conference in October 2021.*

sections in the county councils will be overburdened dealing with this issue; they are not big amounts of money but there will have an array of receipts [to process]."

The AILG will meet with the City and County Management Association (CCMA) in a bid to get uniformity in procedures on expenses in all local authority areas around the country.

### PARTICIPATION AND DIVERSITY

A key priority of the AILG President is to engage with and ensure the implementation of the other non-pay supports identified in the Moorhead Report to help with the workload of members. He welcomes the opportunity to now focus on other issues of local government concern aside from pay issues.

One key focus will be to promote the role of the councillor and encourage increased participation and diversity leading into the 2024 Local Elections.

"We are over halfway through the five-year council term and a primary aim is to build the profile and enhance the status and reputation of the elected member and highlight the importance of local government and the valuable work of our elected members. We work on developing several promotional campaigns to make this more visible to the public."

With the role of councillors becoming ever more complex, a major AILG initiative has been to provide training, resources and support to councillors to meet their legislated responsibilities. Since the start of the pandemic, 17 training webinars have been

provided by the Association to elected councillors across the country.

These online courses which have been made available between July 2020 and November 2021 have proved hugely popular. Delivered in partnership with the Office of the Planning Regulator, the Housing Agency and the Climate Action and Regional Offices, they have demonstrated the success of the Association's hybrid training model, he says.

The training sessions have also enabled the Association to reach a larger demographic of the 949 elected members across the country – making it more accessible for councillors, who may have been unable to attend the events in person, before the outbreak of the pandemic.

"Over 615 elected members have attended at least one of our online training sessions, which represented above 65% of our membership," he notes. All presentations and video recordings are available for members to download on AILG's new website [www.ailg.ie](http://www.ailg.ie).

### ONLINE INFORMATION RESOURCES

In 2021 the AILG also launched a series of information leaflets – currently available online – to brief councillors on frequently featured issues on their business agendas. These included Material Contravention of the Development Plan; S183 Notices; and statutory powers relating to Rights of Way; Reserved Functions and Part VIII 'Own Development' cases.

“An objective of the leaflets is to empower councillors to question and to contribute to processes which have enduring consequences for communities or individuals. The leaflets will have a particular value for newly elected or co-opted councillors for whom the terminology and procedures of local government can be daunting at first sight.

“We’re currently developing additional leaflets to continue to support councillors in discharging their important duties as elected representatives. The AILG has also completed an analysis of the Learning and Development training needs.

“The findings, due to be launched early this year, will be used to develop the AILG Elected Member Learning and Training Development Programme for the next three years (2022-2024). The results will address any knowledge gaps identified by individual councillors and help AILG to move towards the goal of developing a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Education and Training Programme and our Bespoke Externally Accredited Training Programme.”

## VIDEO CONFERENCING TO CONTINUE

In November 2021 AILG launched a new report on ‘the role of video conferencing in supporting local government’ in collaboration with Zoom. Informed by a survey of Ireland’s 949 elected council members, the report outlines how video conferencing supported the continuation of council work throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, the challenges faced in adapting to an online model and the desire to retain a future hybrid model.

“The vast majority of respondents demonstrated a strong acceptance that a blended approach must be taken going forward to make participation in local government more accessible. This is of particular importance to current councillors and those considering running for council who are parents, carers, individuals with a disability, or who are in full or part-time employment.

“While AILG holds the view that physical in-person meetings of the council should always be the default and preferred option, it is important that a council environment

### FACTFILE - NICHOLAS CROSSAN

Donegal’s Nicholas Crossan became the first Independent Councillor to be elected President of the AILG on 30 September 2021.

First elected as a public representative in 1994, the Buncrana native represents the Inishowen Electoral Area on Donegal County Council. He has also served as President of the Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland (AMAI).



supports both digital and traditional communication options, which are accessible for all elected members, and which promote inclusivity and diversity in politics and local government.”

## MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

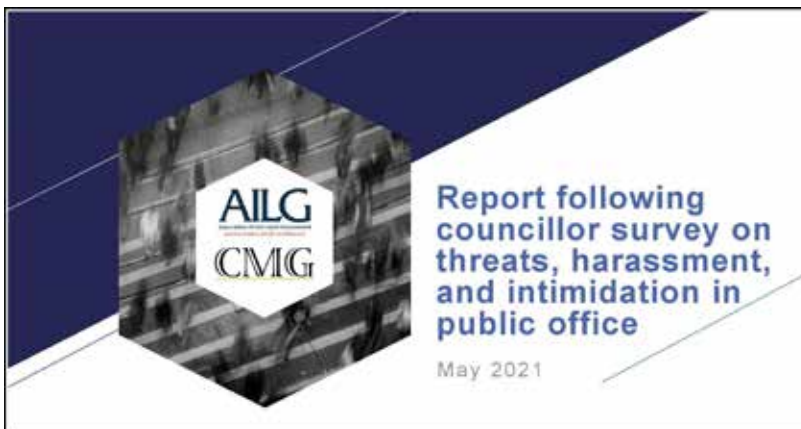
In May 2021 AILG partnered with Crime Management Group (CMG) to launch the results of their national councillor survey which revealed that almost 72% of respondents have experienced threats, harassment, and intimidation within the past three years either in-person or via social media.

The campaign led to an increased awareness nationally and regionally about this growing issue and of the ongoing risks to the mental and physical wellbeing of councillors in Ireland. The association highlighted serious concerns that this growing issue will not only act as a deterrent and hold people back from running for future election but will also affect retention rates.

The Association’s training programme in November 2021 focused on councillors’ mental health and wellbeing and included a briefing on the National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) from John Meehan, HSE’s Assistant National Director of Mental Health Services. This year, as part of its training programme schedule for elected members, the AILG will deliver suicide prevention training to members, in partnership with the NOSP.

Cllr Crossan feels strongly about the need to support councillors in this regard. “While being a councillor is a unique and privileged position, with the potential to make a real difference for your local community it can also be challenging work. It requires a willingness to learn and a significant investment of your time to serve the needs and interests of the local community.

“And at times, it may also require personal leadership and resilience to overcome challenging relationships or carry out complex responsibilities. The role makes legitimate demands on your time on top of personal commitments to family, friends and social life.”



*The survey revealed that national councillor survey which revealed that almost 72% of respondents have experienced threats, harassment, and intimidation within the past three years either in-person or via social media.*