

# LIMERICK'S DIRECTLY ELECTED MAYOR

## A Model for Devolution and Decentralisation?

For the first time in Ireland, the people of Limerick will choose a Directly Elected Mayor (DEM) in June 2024. They will have a unique opportunity to elect a mayor who will provide democratic and developmental leadership for the mid-west county and city, linking local and national government in an innovative way and responding to Limerick's needs and priorities, writes Dr Bríd Quinn.



Since the positive result of the 2019 plebiscite, preparations have been underway to introduce the Limerick DEM, albeit by way of a tortuous path.

An Implementation Advisory Group (IAG) published a comprehensive report in 2020, outlining how best to establish and shape the role of Directly Elected Mayor. A widespread consultation process *Limerick – Let's Talk About our Mayor!* was led by the University of Limerick (UL) and served to raise public awareness and identify challenges and opportunities.

In April 2021, the Government signed off on the General Scheme of a Bill. The Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage undertook pre-legislative scrutiny of the General Scheme and recommended how the Bill might be amended so as to ensure that the DEM has sufficient powers and functions to fulfil the role.

Despite many queries by citizens and politicians, the Bill was not published until August 2023 and after much debate and over 100 amendments, the Local Government (Mayor of Limerick) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2023, was received for final consideration and passed in the Dáil on 13 December 2023.

It is clear from the various consultative processes and from international experience that implementation of a DEM model will change the political dynamics and governance approach in Limerick. Power and influence will be concentrated in the DEM who will have both democratic and statutory authority and will,

as the Bill indicates, be supported by a budget to implement the mayoral programme.

### DEMOCRATIC AND GOVERNANCE PROCESSES

A key concern in the discussions has been to ensure the DEM model implemented would add value to Ireland's democratic and governance processes and underpin place-making actions. The Bill, if fully and wholeheartedly implemented, should provide Limerick with an opportunity to pioneer and elaborate a DEM model appropriate to the Irish context.

The DEM will have a clear mandate with executive functions and will be the visible and legitimate leader, acting on behalf of Limerick's citizens in domestic and international interactions. S/he will be an identifiable, accountable official with whom governmental, business and community actors can negotiate.

In political and academic discussions on the possible role of a DEM, functions and finance are seen as the keys to success or failure. The Bill provides for some means for the DEM, with Budget 2024 allocating €4.327m to support establishment of the office and provide a budget for delivery of the mayoral programme.

These provisions need to be implemented unreservedly if the model is to be successful. Ireland should remember the lessons from system failure in other countries because DEMs were not given the functions, power and finance to carry out their envisaged role.

## Directly Elected Mayor

The Limerick Bill specifies major changes to the operation of the elected council, management of the council's actions and its leadership structure. A three-pillar structure will be put in place, comprising the Elected Council, the DEM and the Director General (formerly the Chief Executive).

The reserved functions of the council will not change. The elected council will retain its primacy and the DEM will be answerable to council members in relation to the performance by him or her of the mayoral functions.

The Dáil debates indicated some dissatisfaction that a wider range of delegated functions was not specified but such amendments were defeated. The Bill details the five-year (renewable) term of office, remuneration of the DEM, office staffing and removal process as well as the details of the electoral and plebiscite processes.

### TRANSFER OF EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

A notable change will be the transfer of executive functions from the Director General (currently Chief Executive) to the DEM and the stipulation that the Director General will be accountable to the mayor for the performance of any functions delegated to him or her. Co-habitation between the councillors and the DEM and the DEM and the Director General will require adaptability from all.

Ireland has often been criticised because its system of government is so centralised and because of the siloed mindset perceived in the system. If implemented wholeheartedly, the mayoral model emerging from the DEM legislation will help achieve more joined-up government through new mechanisms.

The Limerick Mayoral and Government Consultative Forum will institutionalise engagement between the mayor and national government, mandating regular meetings and fostering collaboration. Section 35 gives the mayor the right

to request information from, or be consulted by, government ministers in relation to any national policy or legislation that may impact on Limerick.

Other innovations include the creation of several pioneering structures to support development of the mayoral role, such as the Limerick Mayoral Advisory and Implementation Committee. The Limerick *Project Ireland 2040* Delivery Board and its special Transport Sub-Group, chaired by the DEM, will bring together significant actors to focus on implementing the National Planning Framework and the National Development Plan in the Limerick area.

These structures should bring about a more joined-up approach to governing, reduce centralisation and tailor interventions to Limerick's needs and priorities. International examples, such as Toronto and New York, highlight the role of the DEM in providing strategic leadership to create a collaborative approach and increase effectiveness. The Local Government (Mayor of Limerick) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2023 seems to support such an approach.

### POWER TO THE PEOPLE

The introduction of a DEM model gives power to the people, but with power comes responsibility to choose a mayor who has the personal qualities, professional expertise and political acumen to ensure the short and long-term welfare of Limerick's citizens.

The model leads to concentration of formal and informal power and influence in one individual, hence, that person needs to be capable of effectively wielding such power. Political science research shows that direct elections can foster populism and personalist politics. Ireland, like many other countries, has citizens who are detached, cynical or apathetic about the political system.

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Populist discourse often targets those who are dissatisfied with the existing set-up but rarely changes their reality. Populism can also weaken the relationship between representative and represented by sidelining important issues in favour of attention-seeking mantras and emotional appeals.

Being a good leader is not just about one's opinion or position on issues. It is about attributes, characteristics and qualities that contribute to the wellbeing of others. To address the challenges confronting Limerick, the DEM will require capability, expertise, and a public service motivation and will need to be able to foster collaboration while avoiding cronyism.

### AMBITIOUS DRAFT DEM MODEL

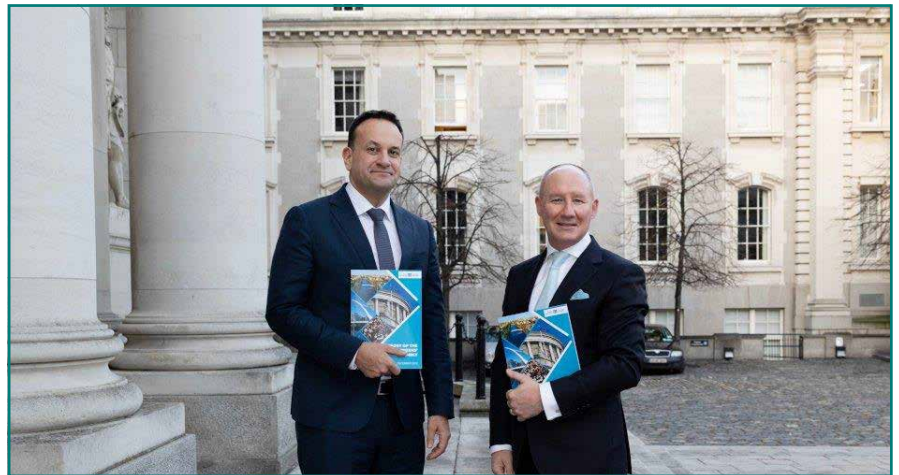
The draft DEM model for Limerick is ambitious and comprehensive and reflects insights from citizens, public and private stakeholders and experts. However, to achieve its ambitions, the reform needs to be fully implemented. The ambitions of many previous local government reforms were not realised because the reforms were attenuated during implementation.

The final Bill is more restrained on some issues than the original draft, a source of dissatisfaction for some Oireachtas members. The long delay between the plebiscite and implementation of the DEM fostered some public disappointment and cynicism. However, the proposed term of five years should foster stability and enable strategic decision-making.

The formal multi-level linkages detailed in the legislation are innovative in the Irish context and should help dilute the centralisation that has constrained Ireland's local government for so long. The legislation includes principles such as consultation and participation, as highlighted in the *European Charter of Local Self-Government*.

The Limerick DEM model of leadership combines 'decide and accomplish' and 'bridging and bonding' leadership with the 'ceremonial and social' leadership which characterises Ireland's current mayors, which is a positive development.

The opportunity to elect a DEM and the associated governance reforms provide positive momentum for change with Limerick leading the way. Nevertheless, some questions



*Will Dublin follow in Limerick's footsteps? Jim Gavin, Chairman of the Dublin Citizens' Assembly, pictured with Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, following the presentation of the Assembly's final report and recommendations for Dublin's DEM to the Taoiseach and the Houses of the Oireachtas in January 2023.*

remain. Does the DEM model transfer the substantial powers required for transformative leadership, not soft authority without enforcement power?

Will the model be implemented to achieve devolution and decentralisation? Are the mandate, means and mechanisms adequate and appropriate? The people

of Limerick have a unique opportunity to elect a mayor who will provide democratic and developmental leadership for the county and city, linking local and national government in an innovative way and responding to Limerick's needs and priorities. Luimneach Abú!

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*Dr Bríd Quinn, a former member of the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Limerick, carries out consultancy and voluntary work in Ireland and abroad for state bodies, development organisations, community groups and international organisations.*

*She has a particular interest in local and regional governance, EU territorial policies and public management reform, topics on which she has published widely. Dr Quinn contributes to a range of organisations monitoring local government systems, observing elections, facilitating workshops and presenting at conferences etc.*

*She was a member of the Expert Advisory Group for the Dublin Citizens' Assembly (2022). Currently Dr Quinn serves as Ireland's representative on the Council of Europe/CLRAE Group of Independent Experts.*

*She is a member of Limerick City and County Council's Audit Committee, Chairperson of the Steering Group's AILG/NUIM Research Project on the 'Councillor in the 21st Century', and is also a lay member of the National Board of ISCP (Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists).*

