

# NEW RIAI PRESIDENT HAS DESIGNS ON PROMOTING THE VALUE OF LOCAL AUTHORITY ARCHITECTS



**Fionnuala May**, County Architect with Fingal County Council, would like to see a designated architects department in every local authority, and the new President of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) tells Michael McHale she wants to promote the value that her profession can bring to city and county councils during her two-year term as RIAI President.

**F**ionnuala May began her two-year term as RIAI President on 1 January and is only the fifth woman in the Institute's 187-year history to take on the role. She previously served as Vice-President and Council member and has contributed across many areas of the Institute, including education, conservation and governance.

She also becomes one of the very few RIAI Presidents to hold the role while working in a local authority. Ms May has worked with Fingal County Council for over 30 years and has been its County Architect since 2011. During her career she has worked to strengthen the position of the architect within the public service and promote the role of architecture in public policy.

Speaking recently to *'Council Review'*, she described her election as RIAI President as 'an absolute honour'. She sees the role as representing her profession in as many fora as possible and advocating on behalf of all architects, whether they operate as lone practitioners, work for large firms, or are employed in the public sector.

The number of architects registered with the RIAI has grown in recent years, reaching over 5,000 members in 2025. Ms May estimates that around 500 of those who work in public service, are spread across government departments, state agencies and city and county councils. And one of her main wishes now as RIAI President is to see a department for architects in every local authority.

## LOCAL AUTHORITY ARCHITECTS

"We'd like to see an architects' department in every local authority," she said. While this is currently not the case, she has seen some progress in getting the profession more involved in the work of local government.

"The number (of local authority architects) is increasing – it's just that they're being employed under different headings from what they may have been in the past," she explained.

"Architects are not just being employed for social housing, they're also involved in other projects to do with urban design, active travel, and many new schemes that are coming on stream. Architects are contributing to those programmes and are being employed specifically for that purpose."

With Fingal County Council, Ms May leads a team of 19 architects as part of a multidisciplinary department that also includes quantity surveyors and technologists.

The team designs and carries out a range of projects for Fingal, as well as working closely with outside agencies when required.

"We're practitioners ourselves, we also employ consultant teams, and I think that makes for a much happier collaboration in that we understand the issues, having to do it every day." Her department has a broad remit, covering new social housing construction and maintenance of existing stock. It also includes staff dedicated to public buildings, as well as a conservation



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office that handles the county's heritage sites, and a construction economics team.

#### **WIDER REMIT FOR ARCHITECTS**

Ms May has been with Fingal County Council since the council was first established; she was hired as an assistant architect in 1994 – the same year that Dublin County Council was split into the local authorities of Fingal, South Dublin and Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown.

Since then, she has held the positions of housing architect, conservation officer and public buildings architect before becoming Fingal's County Architect. During her career, she has seen considerable change in the work that Fingal's architects have focussed on.

"When I first came in, it was mostly social housing and probably with a narrower remit," she said. "Now the team delivering housing projects has become much bigger. We also have different mechanisms for delivery – we do direct delivery ourselves and we also have projects delivered by consultant teams.

"However, it's not just social housing; we also have affordable, mixed tenure housing. We're all the time looking at the different mechanisms for housing delivery." The department's expertise has enabled the council's architects to manage several large-scale housing projects in recent years. This includes partnerships with Glenveagh Homes in Donabate and with GEM Construction in Mulhuddart, delivering hundreds of homes for the region.

#### **NEW BUILDING DEVELOPMENTS**

The department also manages public building developments, which recently included a new library extension in Skerries designed by the council's architects. Conserving the region's many historical sites – including Malahide Castle, Newbridge House and Farm, and Ardgillan Castle – is also key to the work of Fingal's architects.

"We provide architectural services to our economic development department which looks after those buildings," Ms May explained. Other recent projects have included community centres in Baldoy and Meakstown. Designed by Henchion Reuter Architects, the centres are circular buildings that have been developed to fit into the landscape of the parks in which they are located.

The buildings have green roofs and consist of a sport hall with ancillary spaces for different uses, from dance studios to changing rooms. For Ms May and her team, projects like these allow them to get to know the communities that will directly benefit from the development.

"In social housing we wouldn't necessarily know the families who are going to move into our houses, except for the odd occasion when we're working on a bespoke home for someone with additional needs. "However, on the bigger community projects you get a sense of the place that you're developing the building for, so it's a very interesting line of work."

#### **ONGOING LEARNING AND ADAPTATION**

Changes in planning and development regulations over the years have meant that continuous learning and adaptation is a key feature in the work of a local authority architect. Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001-2015 gives responsibility to the elected members of a county or city council to grant permission for developments, following public consultation.

The local authority must provide notice of the proposed development to the public, and members of the public can then make submissions or observations which will feed into a report presented to the councillors to consider when deciding whether or not to grant permission for the development.

"What we're required to do now is a lot more detailed than it may have been when I first joined Fingal County Council," Ms May added. "When we're doing a 'Part 8' now there can be some quite simple schemes that require you to produce up to 30 different reports.

"We have a very detailed internal process in Fingal to bring us step-by-step all the way – from when it is originally just envisaged right to the point when it's granted planning permission by the elected members."

Despite the complicated aspects of her job, the value that architects can bring to local authorities is something Ms May wants to promote during her two-year term as RIAI President.



***Fingal County Council's Affordable Housing team, in partnership with Glenveagh Homes brought 73 new build homes in Balmston, Donabate to the market in late 2025.***

**JOINT HOUSING CONFERENCE**

One of her first duties in this role was to take part in the joint housing conference led by the RIAI and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, which was held in Sligo on 23 and 24 February. The event brought together architects with policymakers to explore issues and work out solutions to many of the problems facing housing delivery in Ireland.

“I think everybody came away from the conference, energised rather than depressed, because what we have to do can be quite overwhelming. There is a big job in delivering housing for the country and getting on top of the supply problem. However, this event certainly gave you the will to go on – it was a really good two days.”

‘Activation Through Collaboration’ was the theme for the 2026 conference with a major focus on how planning and procurement reform, combined with smart design and modern methods of construction (MMCs) can speed up housing delivery and create sustainable communities.

Addressing the conference, the RIAI President said that architects had a vital role to play in meeting national housing

targets and delivering quality buildings that last and sustainable communities. “The conference provides an important platform for architects to collaborate with government housing experts on how to meet our housing needs and remove barriers to delivery. Together we must cut red tape and reform our procurement and planning systems to create ones that are collaborative and enabling.

“Architects bring the design and problem-solving expertise needed to deliver housing that is efficient, sustainable, and built to last. They can work with the Government to identify opportunities to regenerate brown waste sites and introduce adaptation policies that quickly boost housing supply and revitalise communities.”



**FACTFILE – FIONNUALA MAY**

Fionnuala May, Dip. Arch., B. Arch. Sc., MUBC, FRIAI, trained as an architect in the Dublin Institute of Technology and graduated in 1988. She worked in private practice on mainstream and conservation projects before undertaking the Master of Urban and Building Conservation degree in UCD in 1993 and was awarded the MUBC degree the following year.

She joined Fingal County Council as an architect in 1994 and served as a Housing Architect from 1994-2000; Conservation Officer from 2000-2006 and Public Buildings Architect from 2006- 2011. Since then, she has held the post of Fingal’s County Architect.

Fionnuala May holds accreditation as a Grade 1 Conservation Architect from the RIAI. She is a member of ICOMOS Ireland, the Heritage Contractors Registration Board, the IGS, and the Historic Building Committee of the RIAI. She served on the Standing Committee on Architecture to the Heritage Council (2000-10) and the Board (2016-2025) and has been a member of the Board of the Irish Architectural Archive since 2019.



*Conserving the region’s many historical sites (including Malahide Castle, and Newbridge House & Farm in Donabate), is also key to the work of Fingal’s architects.*