

Update Note from Chair – June 2020

Colleagues

Introduction

1. I am looking forward to seeing you all (virtually) on our call on 16 June. Clearly, it has been a very challenging time for the country since we last met on 11 March. Warmest thanks to all of you who have been engaged in the national effort to tackle the consequences of Covid-19, both at Departmental level and in the Council. There has been, justifiably, high praise for how our system has risen to such a difficult and complex challenge.
2. From the perspective of our DEM project, Covid-19 has been a set-back in terms of the timetable, but I think we can all agree there have also been lessons out of the whole experience to date which have relevance for the initiative. Moreover, it has given some of us the time and space to do further research and consultations around the scope and nature of the role and how we might best cast that in our Report.
3. A further reality in play since we last met is that the indications are that we are likely to have a new Government in the coming period. That raises the question of the implications of that for our Report. Our sense is that, whatever the make-up of the Government, there is likely to be good support for the DEM project, not least because of the reality of the Plebiscite. However, the Secretariat and I do feel that there is an onus on us to ensure that our Report is completed with as much despatch as possible so that it can be on the table of the new Government at the earliest possible moment and thereby be included in its strategic planning for its tenure in office. We look forward to discussing all of these points with you on the 10th and coming to a view together on the Work-Plan and Timetable ahead.

Papers and Case Studies

4. As Áinle has reported separately, she and her Secretariat colleagues, in consultation with me, have been working on various Draft Papers as agreed by the IAG in our meetings to date. We will be sharing those with you ahead of the meeting and looking forward to our discussion on them. Our Academic Adviser, Dr Diarmuid Scully, has been doing good work also with Grant Couper of the Secretariat on possible Case Studies from elsewhere for drawing on in our Report and we will have an update on that for you on the 10th also.

Consultations

5. It was agreed at that last meeting that as Chair I would consult with a number of key stakeholders, including IBEC (from whom I had had a request for a meeting) and also the so-called Charter Signatories Group. The latter is a group of key institutions in

Limerick and the region who signed a co-operation agreement with the Council in 2014 as part of the Limerick 2030 Plan, as follows: UL, LIT, MIC, Shannon Group, Shannon Foynes Port Company, LEDP and Limerick Chamber. Since the latter is represented on our Group via Dee Ryan, I focussed my outreach on the other six organisations. My consultation is with the Executive Head of each body – eg in the case of the Higher Educations Institutions, the three Presidents etc. Given that all have been heavily involved in managing the impact of the pandemic on their organisations, I had left the outreach to recent weeks. I have now completed an initial detailed conversation with all six organisations. As mentioned, I also met, at their request, with the Mid West Council of IBEC. In all cases, the discussions were positive and constructive. There is a universal acknowledgement of the opportunity for the future of Limerick and the region represented by the DEM project and all shared some interesting ideas and suggestions in that regard. I am reporting more fully separately on the conversations and these Reports will be included in the outputs of the consultation process overall.

Planning Regulator/National Planning Framework

6. Separately, I have been having a series of very interesting discussions over the last several weeks with the new Planning Regulator, Niall Cussen. I know Niall personally from the early 2000s when I was Joint Secretary of the North/South Ministerial Council in Armagh and he was the Chief Planning Adviser at the Department (Environment as it was at the time) and we worked together on developing a new framework for cross-border co-operation on regional development and spatial planning. Barry Quinlan kindly facilitated that I open a conversation with Niall about the DEM in his new role as the first holder of the post of Planning Regulator. The Office of the Planning Regulator was established under the terms of the National Planning Framework 2018 (NPF) and their role is to monitor implementation of the NPF.
7. In my discussions with Niall, we have been exploring how a DEM could connect with the NPF. As we did so, it became increasingly clear that the NPF is a potentially key piece of the infrastructure for the Office of the DEM. As the new Government framework for the next 20 years (and the law of the land by virtue of being enshrined in legislation - the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2018), the NPF has the capacity to serve in effect as the statutory platform from which the Mayor can operate. What's more it is an empowered and "serviced" platform, with the ways and means built in regarding how things can get done. As you know, the NPF is accompanied by the National Development Plan (NDP), a €116 billion investment programme, and together they constitute Project Ireland 2040, which is the Government's plan for the development of the Regions of Ireland over the next couple of decades. Inserting the DEM into the midst of that platform is a potentially very significant development from the perspective of both initiatives – Project Ireland 2040 on the one hand, and the DEM as an innovative new instrument of governance on the other.

8. One of the key challenges for the NPF and Project Ireland 2040 is how implementation happens locally in the most effective way possible and it is already clear to us in the IAG that there is real potential for a DEM to play an important role in that regard. In light of our discussions, Niall Cussen is now working on a paper, to be finalised in conjunction with Barry and his team, about how that could happen and indeed how the Office of the Planning Regulator and the DEM would formally interact with each in the context of the implementation of the NPF.
9. In addition, Dr Pat Daly and Caroline Curley have been working on a paper on what elements of the implementation of the NPF/NDP could be devolved to the Council in the context of a DEM being in place.

Implications of Covid-19

10. While at one level, the outbreak of Covid-19 has slowed the progress and pace of our work at the IAG, at another level it has brought new possibilities into the equation in terms of the potential of the DEM project. In particular, there has been wide praise and recognition of the critical role Local Authorities, including LCCC, have played in terms of the Government's response to the pandemic. The Community Call initiative has been very effective, as has other initiatives such as the payment of funding to small businesses using the rates infrastructure of the Council. The net point here is the one we have been discussing more generally in the IAG – that Local Government has a reach that touches every household, every business, every community and every individual in its area. That architecture is already in place and clearly very effective. The question arises therefore whether there are other things that architecture and infrastructure could be used for. In other words, could Local Government be more truly about Government Local? All of this gives further impetus to the DEM initiative and one of the elements we need to capture in our Report from the IAG is some of the lessons of Covid in that regard.

Tim O'Connor
Chair, IAG
June 2020