



**Limerick
Chamber**
Advancing business together

29th June 2021

Good afternoon Chair, Deputies and Senators

Thank you for the invitation to speak at today's meeting. My name is Dee Ryan, I'm the Chief Executive Officer with Limerick Chamber and pleased to take up the opportunity to participate in your proceedings to share our perspective on the unprecedented proposals before you for Local Government reform.

Limerick Chamber is the largest business representative body in the Mid-West, and the third largest Chamber of Commerce in the country. We have approximately 420 member organisations supporting, pre-covid, circa 50,000 jobs in Clare, Tipperary, and Limerick the highest concentration of which are located in wider Limerick – Shannon metropolitan area.

We are a mixed sector body, what unites our members is a shared passion for place. The majority of our members are SME's and we have strong support from the largest employers in the region, including institutes of learning, multi-national IDA clients and scaling Mid-West businesses trading internationally.

As the independent voice for business in the region the Chamber is a recognised stakeholder and on behalf of our members is engaged in a wide range of activities, forums and committees focused on economic development including:

- Limerick Economic Forum in the local authority
- Failte Ireland's Gateway City Grouping of Limericks hospitality sector stakeholders
- The Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment Mid-West Enterprise Plan stakeholder group
- Mid-West Regional Skills forum



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- Representatives sit on Economic Development SPC, Transport SPC, Climate Change & Biodiversity SPC, Housing SPC, Culture SPC within the local authority
- Limerick Chamber leads a number of collaborative initiatives regionally, such as the Limerick Transport Form

My team and I engage with members on a regular basis to ascertain their views on a broad variety of matters, and the Chamber is governed by a Board of 16 local business leaders elected from within the membership to strategically direct the operations of the organisation.

Limerick Chamber is uniquely focused on being pro-active drivers of improvements in the Mid-West operating environment. Following consideration of the Plebiscite in 2019, and the campaign delivered by Senator Maria Byrne, the Chamber took a public position of being strongly in favour of meaningful Local Government reform which would devolve greater decision-making powers on local issues to elected representatives including potentially a Directly Elected Mayor.

At the invitation of then Minister Phelan, I was pleased to participate in the Implementation Advisory Group for a DEM who set to work over 10 months exploring what that meaningful Local Government reform could/should include. I wish to acknowledge the significant work done by that group, very capably led by Chair Tim O'Connor and supported by officials from Limerick City & County Council and the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage.

I also wish to acknowledge the progressive and open approach taken by Minister Peter Burke after he took up office in July as he and his team have navigated implementing the recommendations put forward by the group.



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The Chamber welcomes what has already been approved by the Minister and Government – the report in principle and the specific 38 recommendations which are included to date in the general scheme of the Bill, understanding that the Minister as recently as last week when we met with him to discuss progress, restated his intention to continue to work towards including more specificity as early as possible to ensure the best possible outcome from this historic change to local government. In particular we welcome Head 36 establishing a new institutional structure to facilitate regular engagement between national Government and the Mayor at political level.

The Chamber, like Minister Burke, recognises the significant step in Local Government Reform that this Bill takes in creating the new office of DEM.

We support Minister Burkes approach of this being a starting point, and that in order for the office of Mayor to achieve it's maximum potential, the individual who is mandated by the voters should have the power and the means to deliver on their vision for a better Limerick. To that end the additionality specified in the IAG report, while no doubt challenging to introduce, will give the Mayor the greatest opportunity to deliver on the changes that Limericks citizens expressed a desire to see.

To that end the Chamber welcomes Minister Burkes commitment to working towards the potential devolution or assignment on a statutory basis of public functions/services not currently performed by local government – that is, services provided in Limerick either by central Government Departments or state bodies or agencies – to the direct responsibility and control of Limerick city and county council. We look forward to the new office of Mayor being allocated ring-fenced funding to deliver on commitments in multi-annual budgets and that the changes being made will lead to a strengthening and enhancing local democracy in Limerick.



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Finally Chair, I will draw your attention to a recent report produced by Indecon and published by Limerick Chamber entitled 'The Future Development of Limerick City' which was circulated to members as part of our submission today.

This report was commissioned against the backdrop of COVID and born from a sense of urgency that the business community needed to take responsibility for protecting the future of our city centre and get independent expert advice for how to achieve sustainable vibrancy into the future.

The report is a warts and all assessment of how Limerick city performs against other Irish cities and looks internationally for examples of best practice. Repopulating the city centre will have a greater impact than any other policy intervention on the city and so of the 67 recommendations in the Indecon report many are in relation to measures to enhance the livability of the city centre including public realm enhancement, identification of strategic development zones and measures to address upper floor vacancy and a review of the Living Cities Initiative. There are also recommendations for a review of local government funding in light of the impact of the pandemic on work practices particularly in relation to retail and remote working.

We intend that the Future Development of Limerick City report will inform the debate for candidates for the Directly Elected Mayor and focus candidate programmes for local government on the practical roadmap for the development of a sustainable and thriving city that achieves its potential as the economic engine for the county and indeed for the Mid West region.

In closing I thank you Chair for your time and attention today, and for considering my statement. It is the Chambers belief that delivery of this Bill and in due course further additionality, will provide improved quality of life for the citizens of Limerick, enhancing Limerick's reputation as a place to visit, live and



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invest in and will be a key driver in unlocking potential for significant economic benefit in the region in to the future