Report on the public consultation process

concerning a

Directly Elected Mayor for Limerick

M.   Adshead

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

LIMERICK, LET'S TALK ABOUT OUR MAYOR!

This report records the public consultation process which arose from the wish of the Implementation and Advisory Group (IAG) for the Directly Elected Mayor for Limerick 'to build public awareness and support for this significant reform and in the interest of ensuring maximum support and buy-in for this significant reform process' to advance 'a consultation process to allow all stakeholders, including the citizens of the Limerick City and County, to contribute to shaping the role of Directly Elected Mayor'.

The *Limerick—Let's Talk About our Mayor!* project provided a public consultation process in response to the result of a county-wide plebiscite in favour of establishing a Directly Elected Mayor (DEM) with executive powers for Limerick City and County. The process was designed to raise public awareness about the creation of a new kind of Mayor for Limerick, and to provide an opportunity for any associated challenges to be surfaced in advance of its establishment. The project aim was to provide a well-designed, creative and inclusive consultative process that could contribute added-value to existing developmental strategies in Limerick by creating a positive momentum for change. It was envisaged that a genuinely consultative process could help to build consensus about the potential and possibilities for the new role.

The project is a community collaboration between a range of invested stakeholders representing Limerick residents across the county. These include: LCCC; Limerick Public Participation Network, Limerick Youth Service, CWELL, and the University of Limerick, with external support from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and e-Townz—a digital development company focused on community development.

INTRODUCTION

On May 24th 2019, the people of Limerick voted in favour of a directly elected Mayor with executive functions. When offered the same choice, the people of Cork city and Waterford voted against the idea. It seems that Limerick people were ready to take a chance on change, but what does this change entail? Currently, the Mayor is chosen by the Council, and holds a largely ceremonial role which lasts for one year. The directly elected Mayor will be elected by the people of Limerick City and County, with extended powers and will serve for 5 years.

Limerick will be the first - and so far, the only - county in Ireland to have a directly elected Mayor with executive power. As such there is no blueprint to inform how this new style of Mayor will work.

To assist this major reform of local government, the Minister of State for Local Government and Electoral Reform, John Paul Phelan TD, created an Implementation Advisory Group to build on the Policy Document voted on in the Plebiscite and advise the Minister on how best to establish and shape the role of directly elected Mayor in Limerick. The Group have been tasked with a consideration of the potential role of the Directly Elected Mayor into the future, and also the implications for the delivery of services and resourcing for Limerick City and County Council. It will consider the governance relationships between the new Mayor, the Council and the Executive and what possible extra functions the Mayor could take on. The Group must report to the Minister on these matters by summer 2020.

In the interest of ensuring maximum support and buy-in for this significant reform process, the Implementation group decided that a consultation process should be conducted to allow all stakeholders, including the citizens of Limerick City and County to contribute to the definition of a Directly Elected Mayor with Executive Functions. This report summarises that consultation process: it explains how the consultation was designed; how the process was carried out; who was consulted; what they were asked and what additional information and insights they gave.

It should be noted that the time-frame for the consultation corresponded to the outbreak of COVID-19 and all of the restrictions that this entailed. Rather than abandon the consultation, the process was re-imagined and re-configured for a move online. We did our best to ensure as much inclusion as possible in challenging circumstances but would like to acknowledge the inevitable limitations associated with this mode of engagement. Since, however, COVID-19 restrictions are set to continue into the foreseeable future, this report offers additional insights for public consultation exercises with COVID-19.

PROJECT GOVERNANCE

The project is overseen by the Implementation Advisory Group for the Directly Elected Mayor for Limerick. Established by the Minister for Local Government and Electoral Reform in December 2019, the Group comprises representatives from across the social, economic and political spectrum in Limerick. The members of the Group are: Mayor of Limerick City and County, Councillor Michael Collins (previously Councillor Michael Sheahan); Councillors John Sheahan, Elena Secas, Saša Novak Uí Chonchúir (previously Brian Leddin) and Kieran O'Hanlon, Limerick City and County Council; Dr Pat Daly, Chief Executive and Ms Caroline Curley, Director of Services, Limerick City and County Council; Ms Dee Ryan, Chief Executive, Limerick Chamber; Dr Diarmuid Scully, academic advisor; Mr Cillian Flynn, Limerick Public Participation Network; Mr Jack Scanlan, Student Union representative, University of Limerick; Ms Mary Hurley (previously Mr Barry Quinlan), Assistant Secretary and Mr Diarmuid O'Leary, Local Government Division, Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. The Group is chaired by Mr Tim O'Connor, retired career diplomat and former Secretary General to the President of Ireland.

Governance arrangements for Limerick DEM Public Consultation

LIMERICK CITY & COUNTY COUNCIL	DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING, PLANNING & LOCAL GOVERNMENT

LIMERICK IMPLEMENTATION ADVISORY GROUP

CONSULTATION DESIGN TEAM

SUPPORTED BY

CWELL PROGRAMME	LIMERICK PUBLIC PARTICIPATION NETWORK	LIMERICK YOUTH SERVICES
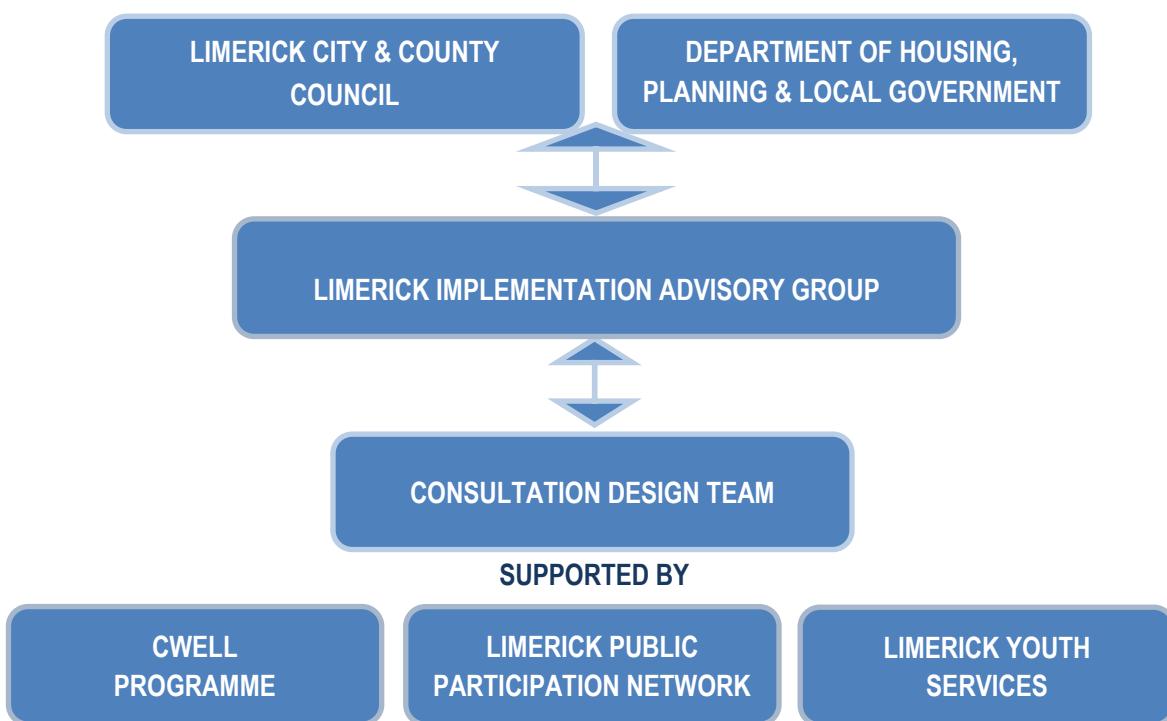
Because of the extremely tight time-frame for consultation—and the constraints of working in COVID-19 isolation, the design team was small and comprised of existing collaborative partners who had all worked together before on various community engaged initiatives. It comprised: Maura Adshead, Professor of Politics, and Head of Engagement, UL; Eileen Hoffler, CWELL Community Engagement Facilitator; John Real, Limerick Youth Services; Pat Kennedy and Nyasha Makawa, e-Townz. The Limerick Public Participation Network (PPN) quickly established itself as an indispensable ally.

WHO'S WHO AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

UL Engage serves as the central hub for University civic engagement activities and works with all divisions and faculties to amplify, incubate and co-ordinate the various ways that students, faculty and staff in the University of Limerick can work to make a difference.

The aim of UL Engage is to integrate civic and community engagement into the University's core missions in research and teaching. Our communities include local and global connections with all kinds of stakeholders in civic, public or professional spheres, with policy makers, product users, third sector organisations, community groups and residents.

The Community Wellness, Empowerment Leadership and Life skills (CWELL) programme is a co-created, community based adult education programme that aims to enhance the capacity of local communities experiencing disadvantage to identify and address areas of social concern.

The Limerick Mayor project was supported by CWELL students: Jackie Condon, Margaret Fitzgerald, Christopher Mallard, Stephanie Ryan and Jaraslav Strnad

Limerick Youth Service (LYS) is a leading provider of *youth work*, education, training, employability & volunteering opportunities for young people and, with nearly 50 years' experience, is to the fore in providing quality *youth* led programmes

e-Townz is a digital development company that specializes in community development and community engagement supports. We have built over 150 websites for public bodies, non-profits, business and research and have many years experience of working with professional researchers inside and outside the university sector.

Limerick Public Participation Network (PPN) is an independent network of community, voluntary, social inclusion and environmental organisations, working together for a better Limerick.

Limerick Public Participation Network enables the community to be represented in decision-making processes such as Limerick City and County Council committees and local public consultation processes.

PROJECT RATIONALE

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The *Limerick—Let's Talk About Our Mayor!* Project aimed to:

- develop awareness around regarding the new style of Mayor,
- to increase interest in the new Mayor as an opportunity for positive change,
- to promote ownership of the initiative by encouraging participation,
- to support a collective Limerick identity and
- to identify Limerick as an innovator.

The tag lines 'Limerick—Let's talk about our Mayor!' and 'Help Limerick Make History' were co-created with the focus groups comprising young people from LYS and adults from the CWELL programme who worked together to develop a clear and positive messaging in all project posters, social media and print media. In doing so, the project sought to create forums for political engagement where all participants could feel confident and comfortable to have their say about what matters to them, supported by a survey instrument to collect their opinions.

The project is designed to develop people's awareness and elicit their opinions on the understanding that there are no right or wrong answers. The aim was to encourage discussion in ways that were inclusive, respectful and non-judgemental. The project does not promote any particular political view, person or party, over another. The goal was for participants to work out their own views and to realise their collective agency as active citizens.

The collaboration between the university, community projects, youth services and the PPN was intended to promote local ownership of the initiative and to pilot LCCC's public engagement model, using participative and engaged methods with local community partners as a means to develop citizen consultations that can be used by LCCC in the future. As such, despite the drawbacks of developing this consultation in the midst of the initial 'lock-down' of COVID-19, the project has been a useful learning exercise for how citizen engagement can proceed in the constrained circumstances that a future with COVID-19 presents.

In this respect, a further ambition for this project was to demonstrate Limerick's capacity to innovate and co-create with communities in new ways, leveraging the experience and connections already afforded by the Council's SMART city digital network into new ventures for civic engagement and inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

When the Implementation Advisory Group (IAG) first contacted University staff to inquire about a public consultation exercise, they learned that just such an initiative was already underway as part of the University of Limerick CWELL programme. Adult learners in the CWELL programme had already identified a need for community-based consultations, which were designed and delivered by locals within communities, in order to provide authentic community engagement. This approach to local development is a tried and tested formula which was mainstreamed in the EU's LEADER programme and underpinned much of the rural renewal that occurred under EU programmes in Ireland throughout the 1980s. The idea is that local people are best placed to understand local concerns and that when local people are proactive in addressing these concerns, they typically have a much more positive connection with and response from their own communities than typical public consultation exercises run by private companies or external agents.

Given the very tight short time-frame between the creation of the IAG and the proposed date for elections of the new Mayor (in 2021), it was decided to 'piggy-back' on this existing initiative and expand its terms of reference to specifically include a consultation concerning the Directly Elected Mayor. This small project team would be joined and supported by the UL Engage team. UL Engage would work with existing collaborative partners to expand the community consultation process across the county. Working with the support of key stakeholder groups and organizations in Limerick, UL Engage would provide training and resources for a series of facilitated workshops which would be made available to groups and associations across the county. The project team would provide information and support for these 'community conversations', and make sure that everyone's contribution was collected and included in a final report – to be given to the council to help them plan the new mayor's job.

This approach regarded the process of consultation just as important as the outcome.

The intention was to provide an opportunity for genuine exploration and dialogue amongst the people of Limerick and to create a county-wide conversation about what a DEM might mean for Limerick. In doing so, the ambition for the consultation was not to illicit a blue print for legislation underpinning the post—but to help set the context and framework for discussions concerning the nature and scope of the DEM's role.

It was with this in mind, that the conversational prompts and simple questions detailed overleaf were used as a basis for discussion.

CONVERSATIONAL PROMPTS & QUESTIONS

These conversational prompts and questions were originally designed for a face-to-face workshop, in a World Café style. World café conversations sit participants in groups of no more than 5 or 6 around a table to discuss their responses to questions on issues of concern. By enabling smaller group discussion, participation is less intimidating (compared, for example, to standing up and speaking to a hall full of people), more people are able to join the conversation and more voices and opinions can be heard. In addition to deploying rapporteurs for each table, participants are provided with coloured markers or pens and encouraged to note down their thoughts on doodle sheets provided at the table. This means that even when people do not get an opportunity to speak, they can still input their questions, ideas or opinions into the conversation. These notes are then recorded and coded by the research team and included in the overall data collection.

The outbreak of COVID-19 and all of its associated restrictions coincided almost exactly with the time-frame planned for this consultation process. As we were obliged to move our consultation online, we tried to capture the same discursive atmosphere via the use of break out groups and real-time visualisations of participant responses. We used the online collaboration tool, menti meter, an app that enables users to share their answers to questions and give real-time feedback from their mobile, laptop or desktop device.* Collecting the data in this online format, meant that we needed to simplify the data collection in ways that it could be reported visually in real-time.

Just as we had re-imagined the consultation process online, some of the COVID-19 lock-down restrictions were lifted, enabling a small number of face-to-face consultations to take place where social distancing was possible. These then, took on the same format as the online consultations to enable a merging of all responses.

In all, 21 facilitated community consultations were hosted —primarily online. Facilitator guides and video resources provided on the project website, enabled smaller family groups or friends to host their own conversation. Provision was also made for individuals to input into the conversation via a survey link on the project website.

In total 927 respondents answered the survey questionnaire. Given that national opinion polls and surveys typically sample 1000 survey respondents (and these without any facilitation), we believe that the response rate for this consultation is robust enough to give meaningful insights into Limerick people's opinions about a Directly Elected Mayor.

*to find out more about mentimeter, see: https://elearning.qmul.ac.uk/articles/ask-the-audience-with-mentimeter/

CONVERSATIONAL PROMPTS & QUESTIONS

Q1 WHY DO YOU THINK THE PEOPLE OF LIMERICK VOTED FOR A DIRECTLY ELECTED MAYOR?

This is an open-ended question to begin the discussion. The question is specifically put this way, because some people may not have voted in favour of a DEM, and others may not have voted at all. Putting the question this way enables participants to think about the issue more widely – making them reflect on everyone else's opinion, not just their own.

Participants break out into smaller groups for discussion and share their thoughts. Following this, participants list the 'top 3' reasons that they believe Limerick people voted for a Directly Elected Mayor and re-join the group as a whole. All the answers given are relayed in real-time and presented back to the group, forming the basis for the next conversation.

Fig.1 an example of group feed-back for discussion.

This word cloud is based on a random sample of 40 answers to the question: 'Why do you think the people of Limerick voted for a Directly Elected Mayor?'

Q2 WHAT SKILLS SHOULD WOULD YOUR IDEAL MAYOR HAVE AND WHAT BACKGROUND EXPERIENCE WOULD YOUR IDEAL MAYOR HAVE?

Having established why the group think Limerick people want a Directly Elected Mayor, the group is now challenged to think about what kind of person might best perform this role, by looking at the skills and attributes that might best deliver on the ambitions for a Directly Elected Mayor. Participants work in small groups to discuss the necessary skills and attributes required for the role that has been outlined in the previous discussion. The purpose of this discussion is to develop an awareness of the person who may, or may not, be best qualified for the role. The discussion is intended to surface any pre-conceptions about who 'should' be mayor and open up the range of possibilities that such a role could entail. Focus groups were used to select the top 7 most popular answers to questions about skills and attributes. Participants were then asked to rank these skills in order of preference.

CONVERSATIONAL PROMPTS & QUESTIONS

Q3. LOOKING AT YOUR COMMUNITY AND AT LIMERICK AS A WHOLE, WHAT DO YOU THINK IS BEST ABOUT LIMERICK?

This question is designed to highlight the attributes and/or amenities that Limerick people regard most about their county. It provides citizen-based information about what is best about Limerick and points to the kinds of things that a new Directly Elected Mayor might want to pay attention to or champion.

Q4. LOOKING AT YOUR COMMUNITY AND AT LIMERICK AS A WHOLE, WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE LIMERICK'S MAIN CHALLENGES?

This question is designed to illicit the top concerns of Limerick people and is one which we hope can also be useful in a consideration of the Directly Elected Mayor's role. The question is open-ended, since we do not presume that the challenges identified by previous reports written *on* Limerick will necessarily be the same as those identified by people living *in* Limerick.

Thematic analysis was used to categorise the range of answers given into the following 10 main concerns:

1.   Mindset and Attitude
2.   Perception of Limerick
3.   Public Infrastructure and Services
4.   Community Well-being, Access, Equality and Inclusion
5.   Engagement
6.   Development of the City
7.   Uneven development
8.   Investment and Economic Development
9.   Crime, Security and Safety
10.   Arts, Culture and Heritage

Q5. IF YOU WERE MAYOR, WHAT WOULD YOU FOCUS ON?

This final open-ended question allows for a further elaboration on points of view concerning any of the topics raised in discussion. This 'free space' enabled participants to elaborate on issues that the discussion may have raised. Participants were encouraged to submit any further information or opinions using the LCCC My Point submission point or, directly to the research team.

WHO PARTICIPATED?

The consultation comprised 21 hosted 'community conversation' focus groups: 8 facilitated by Limerick Youth Services; 8 facilitated by the Limerick PPN; and 5 facilitated by CWELL. These were in addition to community conversations carried out independently using the facilitator guide, resources and materials created by the team and provided on the website.

Two email submissions were received. These included the results from a Liveable Limerick survey of 136 respondents, created by Luke Doherty and carried out on the Liveable Limerick Instagram account, plus a submission by Limerick environmental trust.

In total, 927 participants took part in our survey questionnaire either individually or as part of a community conversation. It should be noted since participants were free to skip questions that they did not wish to answer, the total number of responses in each of the tables below varies slightly between questions.

Collaborating with Limerick Youth Services enabled young peoples' voices to be heard and included in the survey, giving a broad age range to the survey that is roughly proportionately comparable to the county demographic

What is your age bracket?

Age bracket	Responses
14 - 16	15 | 2%
16 - 24	111 | 12%
25 - 34	187 | 20%
35 - 44	276 | 30%
45 - 54	169 | 18%
55 - 64	89 | 10%
65+	44 | 5%
Not Answered	32 | 3%
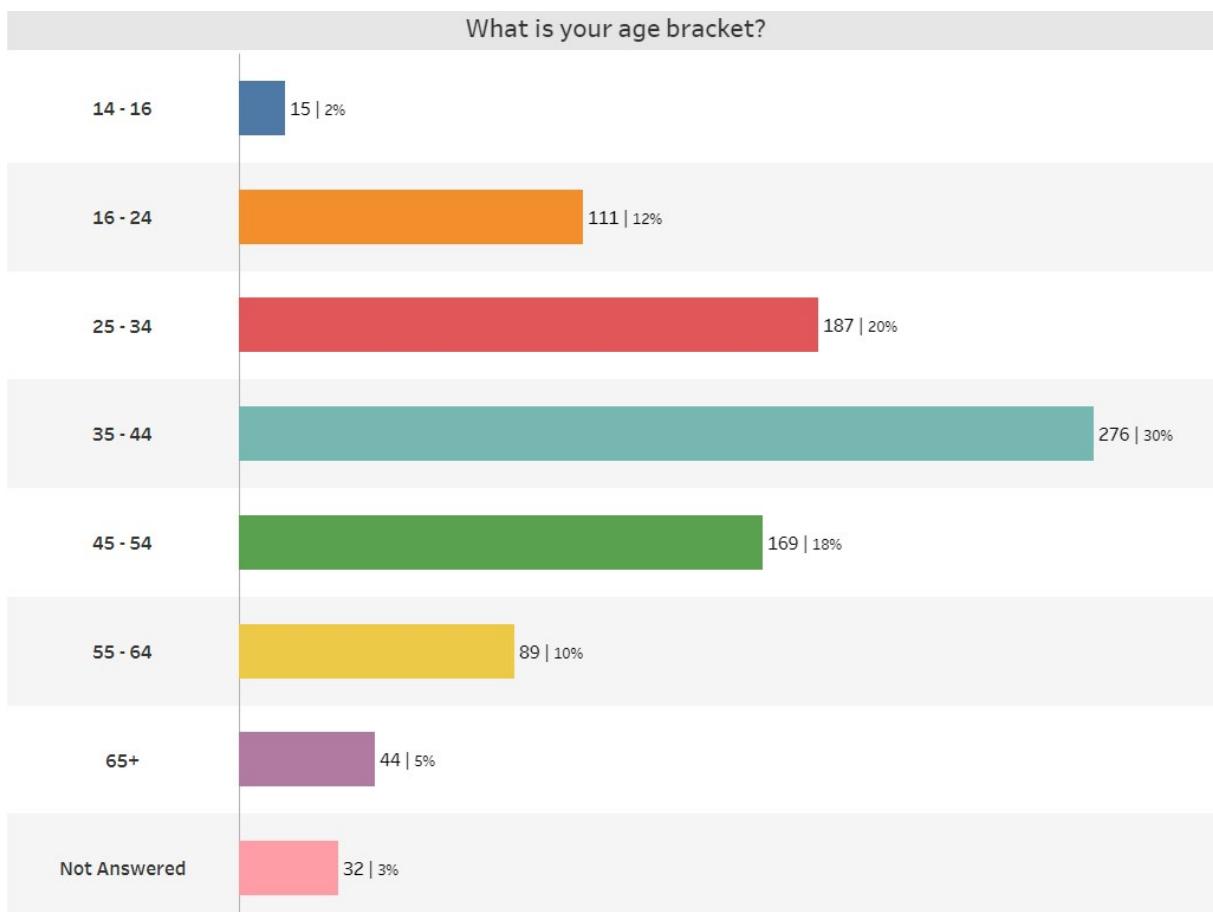
WHO PARTICIPATED?

Limerick Public Participation Network were invaluable in providing us with introductions to local groups and associations representing lesser heard voices. In challenging circumstances, they demonstrated the value of local networks and knowledge to promote inclusion.

Whilst the short time-frame for the consultation, the COVID restrictions and the online format all worked against more inclusion, it is undoubtedly the case that Limerick PPN secured more inclusion that would have been possible without their help.

Overall, 56% of participants were from the city, and 42% the county.

Which part of the county are you from?

Region	Count	Percentage
City	516	56%
West	130	14%
East	126	14%
South	65	7%
North	64	7%
Not Answered	22	2%
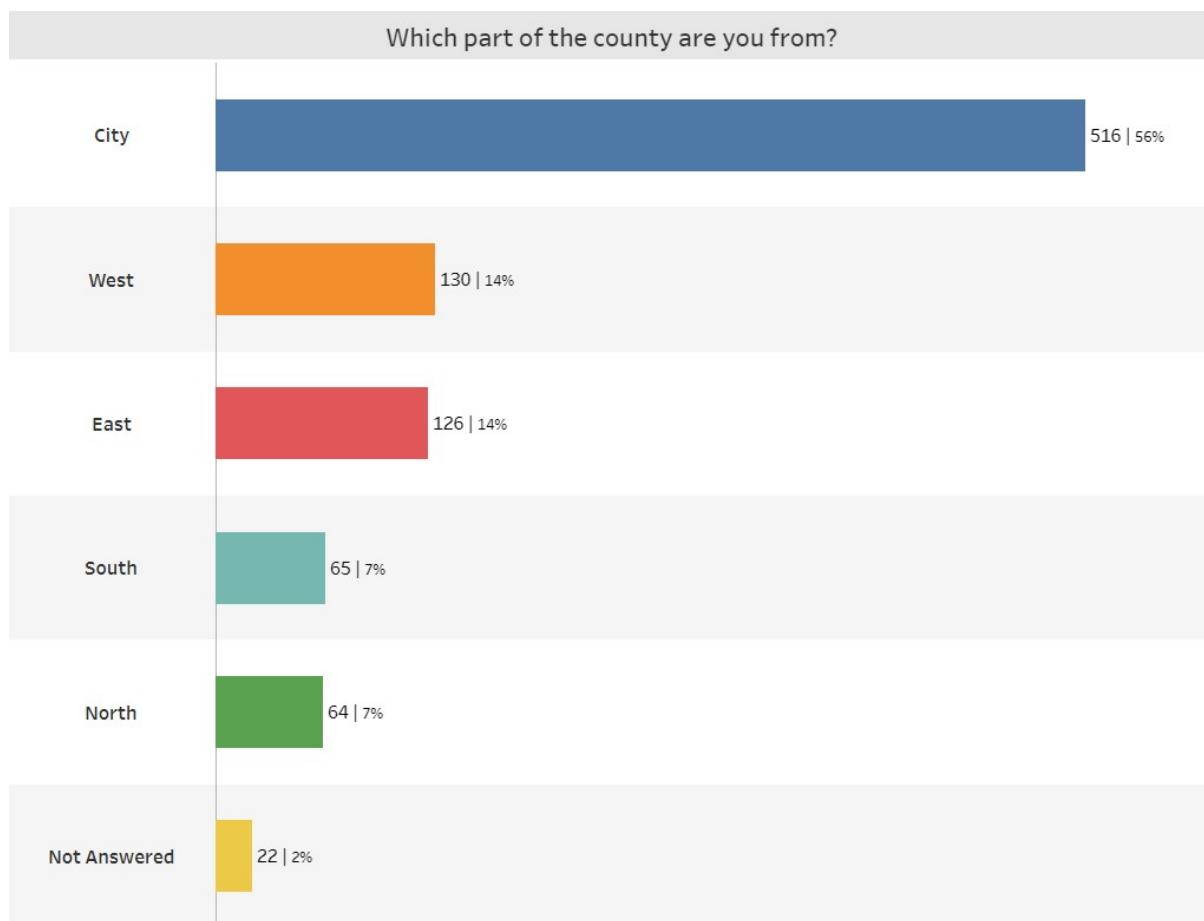
WHO PARTICIPATED?

Whilst the bulk of participants were in full-time employment (63%)

Are you currently .... ?

Full-time Employed	579 | 63%
Student	111 | 12%
Part-time Employed	66 | 7%
Unemployed	50 | 5%
Retired	50 | 5%
Not Answered	45 | 5%
Homemaker	22 | 2%
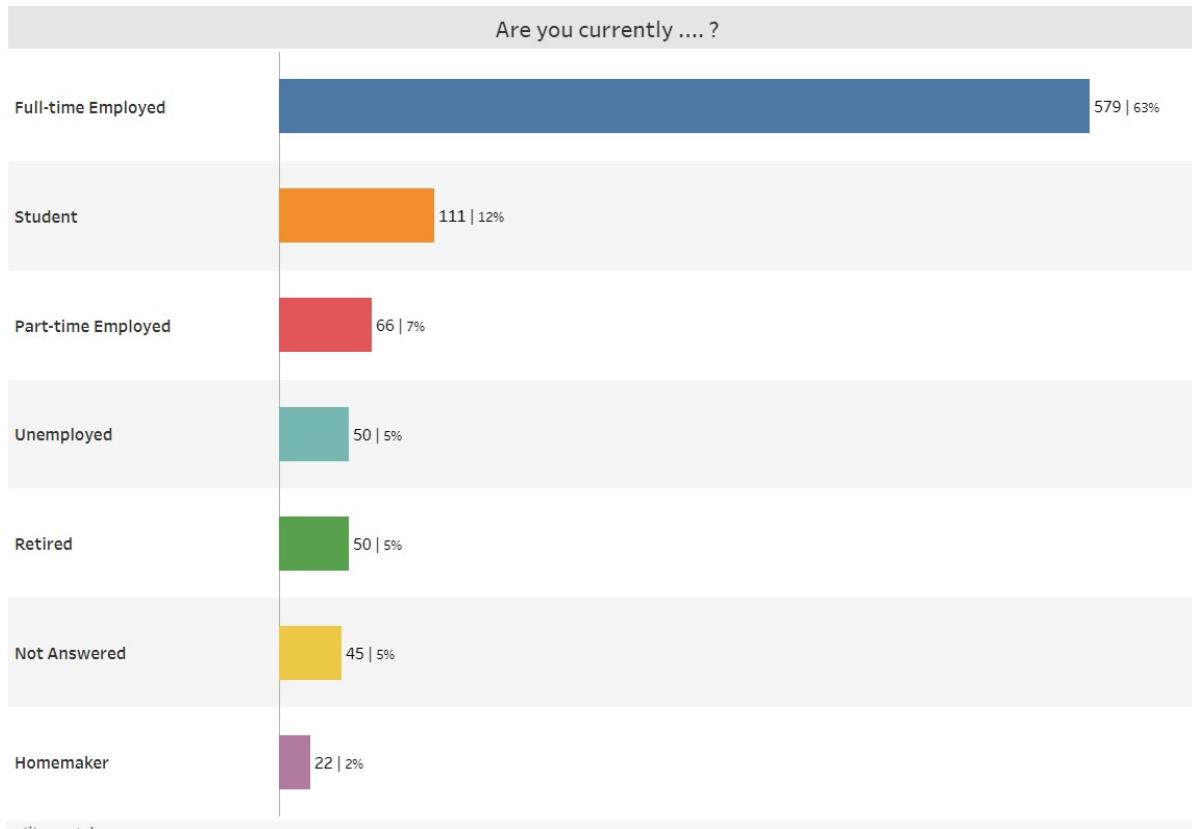
Gender breakdown?

RESULTS

RATIONALE FOR A DIRECTLY ELECTED MAYOR

Fig.2 responses to the question: 'Why do you think the people of Limerick voted for a Directly Elected Mayor?'

The range and variety of responses to this open-ended question are illustrated in the word cloud above which highlights the key words in all of the responses to this question. Whilst the word clouds created by individual 'community conversations' served as a useful focus for discussion, the composite word cloud of responses from everyone has limited explanatory value. In order to provide more insight, these variously worded responses were analysed and categorized into a smaller number of common themes, which enables a much clearer reading of the answers given.

Five clear thematic bundles of answers emerged as useful categories to interpret the alternative rationales ascribed to Limerick's decision to establish a directly elected mayor. These are: a pro-democratic / reform rationale; a change rationale; promoting an independent Limerick rationale; a local development rationale; and a leadership rationale.

In addition to these, a sizeable number of respondents (263) left this question blank. From this substantial category 14 respondents suggested that people voted yes because they were somehow 'misinformed' or 'mislead'. These respondents constitute the category labelled 'other' on the table.

Why do you think the people of Limerick voted for a Mayor?

Category	Value
Democractic Reform	324 | 35%
Other	278 | 30%
Change	153 | 17%
Independent Limerick	70 | 8%
Local Development	47 | 5%
Leadership	47 | 5%
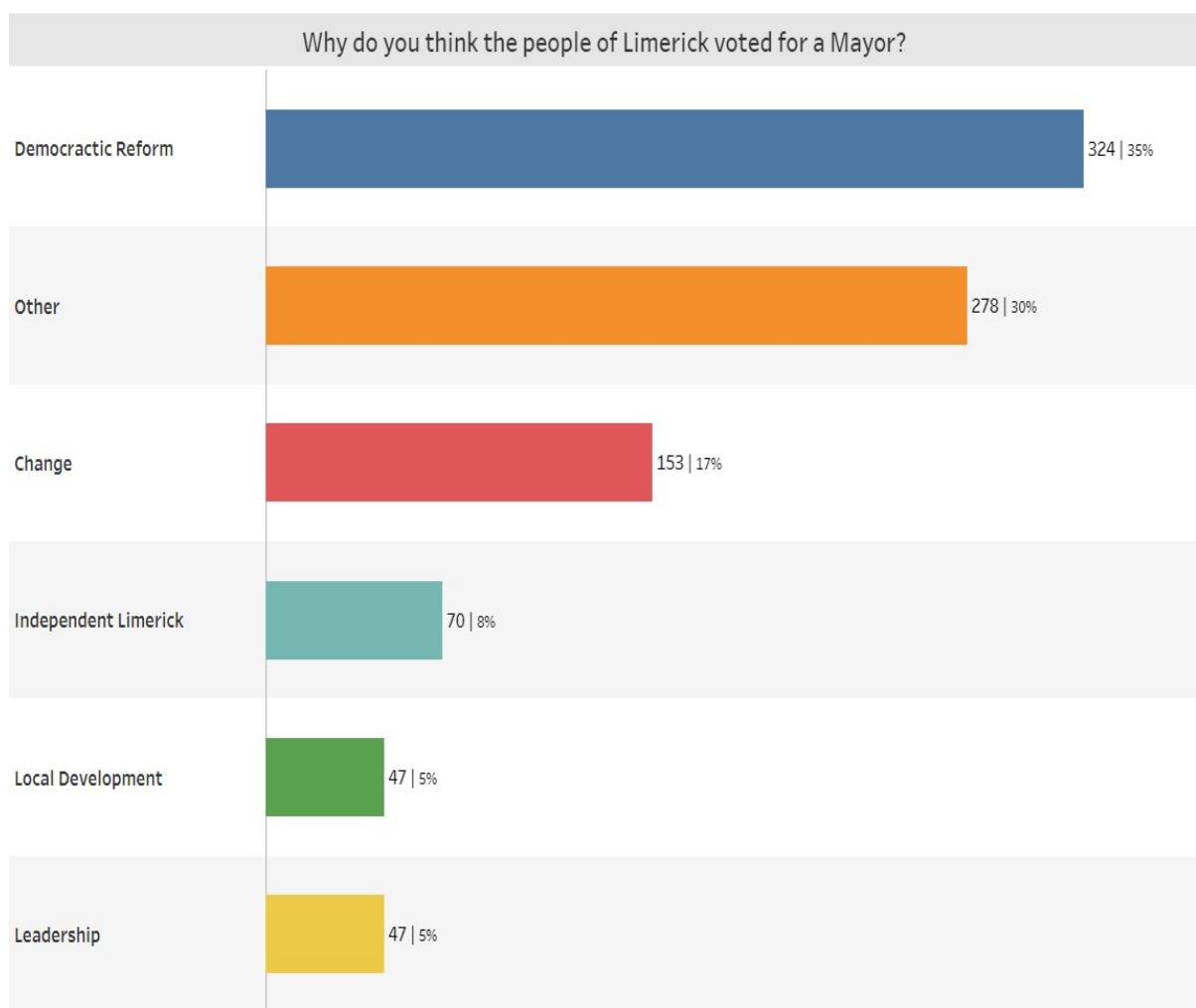
- **Pro-democratic / Reform Rationale**

All answers in this category made reference to a need to develop democracy and/or reform of local government. Approximately half of the answers directly referenced a democratic rationale, citing 'to increase participation', 'to give the people a voice' and to 'develop participation and/or local autonomy' as the main reasons for voting yes. Strikingly, at least half of these answers referred to the need for increased accountability in local government. In fact, across all 927 responses to this question the single most popular rationale for a Directly Elected Mayor was to 'to increase accountability'.

In all answers to this question, providing local accountability for decisions made was clearly regarded as the most important rationale to establish a DEM. Whilst a number of answers referred to greater devolution or increased transparency in regard to local level decision making, a great many perceived current local authority arrangements negatively: references to corruption, cronyism, incompetence were not uncommon. These perceptions suggest that there is much work to be done in clarifying the work and making clear the accountability structures of local government.

- **Other**

Just under 30% of those participating in this consultation (264 respondents to be exact) could not explain why Limerick people voted for a Directly Elected Mayor and gave no answer to this question. This number is significant because these participants have chosen to engage in a consultation process: they are, by definition, interested citizens.

If these interested citizens, who elect to participate in a public consultation, can give no answer it points to a significant lack of communication between government and communities.

- **Change rationale**

All answers in this category expressed a need to 'do something differently', either because respondents were frustrated and unhappy with existing arrangements, or simply out a belief that change and innovation is a positive thing. The clear dichotomy between our 'frustrated pessimists' and 'optimistic innovators' led us to carry out further analysis of the 153 change respondents. The result was a break-down of roughly 2:1 critical (97) versus hopeful (55). Those who were critical most commonly expressed frustration with the current system, which they typically regarded as unresponsive or ineffective. Those who were hopeful, most commonly assumed that the DEM offered an opportunity for 'progress' and 'promotion' of Limerick's interests. Typically, however, these answers did not specify any details about what might progress or be promoted.

- **Independent Limerick / Promotion of Limerick**

The answers in this category comprised a variety of non-critical responses which regarded a Directly Elected Mayor as providing a good opportunity to develop the county further, by promoting its independent spirit and iconoclastic status.

- **Local Development Rationale**

The range of answers given in this category suggests that most respondents regard local development as more concerned with planning and oversight of local decision-making and the capacity to address imbalances— between different social groups, or geographic areas. Economic development might be implied, but was rarely cited as a reason in and of itself. Whilst a few answers made reference to specific kinds of development, including transport, pedestrianisation and tourism, the vast bulk of all answers in this category referred to the need for greater local control and autonomy in decision-making.

- **Leadership Rationale**

The answers in this category suggested the need for more focused leadership. Many responses revealed very negative perceptions of the council and its politicians. The connection between decreased confidence in established political processes and increased desire for strong leadership is a well established pre-requisite for populist and anti-democratic tendencies. It therefore perhaps comforting, that whilst many of the responses in this category referenced quite cynical and unflattering views of the council, the category was, overall, the smallest.

Key take aways

- Limerick people want more accountability

- Limerick people want a change from the current system of governance

- Limerick people are potentially engaged citizens but many feel left out.

- General scepticism and low level of regard for the council and local politicians.

- Whatever the new Mayor does, local government needs to be better able to communicate with local communities to address the deficit in confidence regarding local politicians and local government

- Worth noting that only 29% of participants had any prior experience of community consultation and that 64% said that they would like to be consulted in the future.

PROFILING THE DIRECTLY ELECTED MAYOR

WHAT KIND OF A PERSON DO YOU THINK IS BEST ABLE TO DO THIS JOB?

The interactive and conversational format for this consultation meant that participants were given the chance to think about the rationale for a DEM before being invited to discuss the necessary skills and attributes required for the role. The previous section has illustrated that just over half of all survey participants considered a need for change and democratic accountability as the major rationale for a DEM. Analysis of the qualitative statements which resulted in these categorisations suggests considerable cynicism about current local government and a generalised feeling of disconnection. This perhaps explains why the top skills identified as necessary for the new mayor were 'good listener' and 'problem solving' and also why 'political experience' was considered the least necessary skill.

These attitudes are perhaps not surprising given the current global climate of increasing political polarisation and anti-democratic tendencies. Local government must work against these trends and now more than ever, if we want our democratic systems to survive the onslaught of populist anti-governmental rhetorics.

What skills does a person with this job need?

|		
1.	Good Listener	187 | 25%
2.	Problem solving skills	168 | 23%
3.	Leadership skills	121 | 16%
4.	Willing to think 'outside the box'	106 | 14%
5.	Management skills	94 | 13%
6.	Team builder / motivator	46 | 6%
7.	Politically experienced	24 | 3%
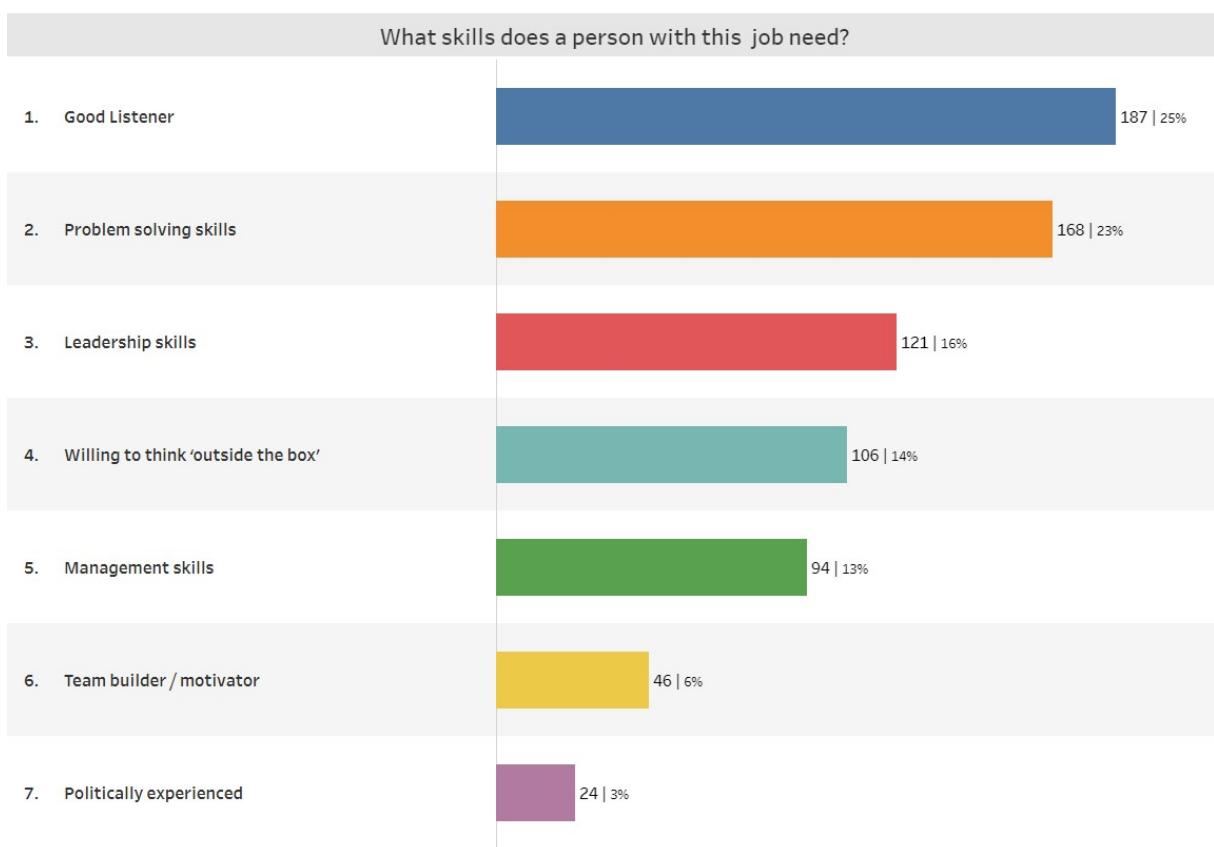
table 2.1 responses to the question; what skills would your ideal mayor have?

PROFILING THE DIRECTLY ELECTED MAYOR

Notwithstanding the anecdotal mistrust of politicians and political processes that is prevalent in many of the open-ended answers in this consultation, there is nevertheless an appreciation for locally accountable, administrative structures to better deliver local services and amenities. This is reflected in the fact that 'democratic reform and accountability' was given as the single biggest rationale for creating a DEM, and that experience in 'infrastructure and planning' was identified as the key desired experience — both areas of concern which were flagged in the question concerning Limerick's greatest challenges.

Perhaps surprisingly, experience in business and economy did not feature highly in the responses, coming in behind experience in community development, public administration, and the arts music and culture.

What background experience would your ideal Mayor have?

|		
1.	Infrastructure & Planning	214 | 29%
2.	Arts, Music & Culture	130 | 18%
3.	Politics & Public Administration	126 | 17%
4.	Community Development	107 | 15%
5.	Business & Economy	99 | 13%
6.	Health, Wellbeing & Recreation	62 | 8%
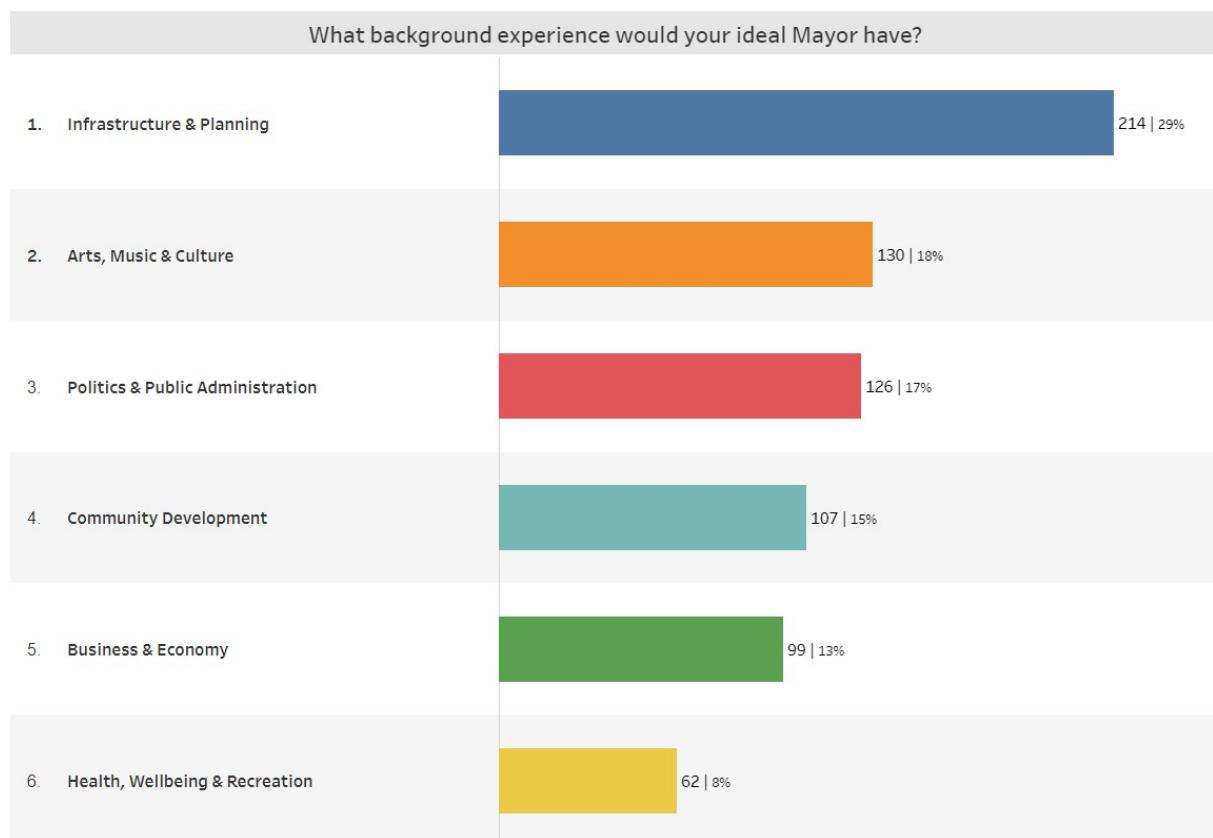
Table 2.2 responses to the question; what background would your ideal Mayor have?

Key take away

Overall, a profile of Limerick's DEM suggests that they need to be more concerned with *the system of local government* than with any one area of interest over another.

CHAMPIONING LIMERICK

This question was designed to highlight Limerick attributes and /or amenities that are most prized by Limerick people, in order to get a sense of the kinds of things that a new Directly Elected Mayor might want to pay attention to or champion. The answers are revealing.

Limerick 2030, the economic and spatial plan for Limerick city and county, notes the essential need for a coordinated effort to market and rebrand Limerick with a so-called 'place proposition' that draws heavily on the county as: 'attractive and historic', 'green and sustainable' and 'creative and vibrant' (Limerick 2030, p.122). In our survey, however, when respondents were asked to identify what is best about Limerick, 'heritage and history' and 'arts, music and culture' came in 6th and 7th place out of 8, with 'waterways, lakes, rivers and sea' marginally more popular in 5th place. Perhaps most surprising of all, was that in the home of Munster rugby and a city popularly renowned for its sporting reputation, Limerick people placed 'sports and fitness' last!

Similarly whilst *Limerick 2030* notes the 'demise in Limerick's shopping offer' (Limerick 2030, p.81) and considers it's improvement a key prerequisite to other developments in business and tourism etc (p.142) over half of our survey respondents thought 'shopping and leisure' was best about Limerick.

Looking at Limerick, where you live in your community and across the county as a whole. In your opinion what's best about limerick ?

|		
1.	Shopping and leisure	214 | 56%
2.	Traditional Irish experience	186 | 48%
3.	Multi-culturalism	134 | 35%
4.	Tourist Activities and Entertainment	130 | 34%
5.	Waterways, lakes, rivers and sea	91 | 24%
6.	Heritage and History	60 | 16%
7.	Arts, Music and Culture	54 | 14%
8.	Sports and Fitness	51 | 13%

Table 3 responses to the question; what do you think is best about Limerick?

CHAMPIONING LIMERICK

The difference between the *Limerick 2030* vision for Limerick and Limerick peoples' opinions about Limerick in 2020 is not irreconcilable and may indeed reflect the obvious difference between *what is* and *what could be*.

As the next section illustrates, there are important and fundamental areas of agreement between Limerick peoples' perception of Limerick's challenges and those outlined in the Limerick 2030 plan.

What is clear, however, is that there is not much evidence of a consensus between Limerick leaders and Limerick people about what is best about Limerick. The reasons for this may be many and various. But if the marketing of Limerick is based on a 'place proposition' that requires 'a central idea and associated themes' to 'ensure a consistency of message' to market and rebrand Limerick, then surely the task would be easier if it were underpinned by popular public awareness and support.

Key take aways

- Building a positive 'place proposition', that is, a confident self-awareness of what is positive about Limerick is regarded as a key factor in Limerick's rejuvenation.

- Place propositioning is intended to be more than a strap line or slogan, but 'a strategic, motivational and inspirational statement of intent'

- Place proposition strategy relies on a central idea and associated themes that are confidently and consistently 'supported and proactively championed by all partners and stakeholders'

- The current place proposition strategy needs more support to create the necessary buy-in from Limerick people.

Authentic ~ Innovative ~ Progressive

| Enterprise and knowledge | Attractive and historic | Green and sustainable | Creative and vibrant |
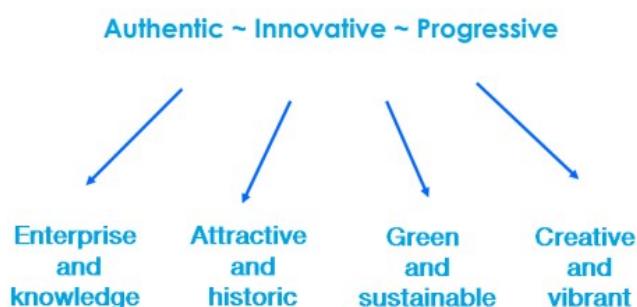
Figure 3 Limerick's 'place proposition' (Limerick 2030, p.126)

LIMERICK CHALLENGES

Fig.4 responses to the question: 'What do you think are Limerick's main challenges?'

The range and variety of responses to this open-ended question are illustrated in the word cloud above which highlights the key words in all of the responses to this question. In order to provide more insight, these variously worded responses were analysed and categorized into a smaller number of common themes, which enables a clearer reading of the answers given. Ten clear thematic bundles of answers emerged as useful categories to interpret the alternative challenges facing Limerick city and county concerning:

1. Public Infrastructure and Services

2. Crime, Security and Safety

3. Investment and Economic Development

4. Perception of Limerick

5. Development of the City

6. Mindset and Attitude

7. Community Well-being, Access, Equality and Inclusion

8. Uneven development

9. Engagement

10. Arts, Culture and Heritage

LIMERICK CHALLENGES

Looking at Limerick, where you live in your community and across the county as a whole.. in your opinion what are Limerick's chief challenges?

|	Challenge	Value
1.	Public Infastructure/Services	223 | 38%
2.	Crime, Security & Safety	140 | 24%
3.	Investment & Economic development	116 | 20%
4.	Perception of Limerick	108 | 18%
5.	Development of City Cemtre	63 | 11%
6.	Mind Set/ Attitudes	58 | 10%
7.	Community Wellbeing, Access, Equality & Inclusion	39 | 7%
8.	Uneven developmet	22 | 4%
9.	Engagement	19 | 3%
10.	Arts, culture & heritage	16 | 3%

Table 4 responses to the question; what do you think are Limerick's chief challenges?

In contrast to the diversity of answers concerning what is best about Limerick, participant answers concerning Limerick's chief challenges resonate clearly with those identified in the *Limerick 2030* plan. The most popular answers concerned deficits in public infrastructure and/or services.

- **Public Infrastructure and Services**

While housing, homelessness and transport were the biggest concerns expressed there was also a comprehensive list of other infrastructural deficits, concerning: addiction, children's activities, composting, cycling lanes, education, flooding, health services, littering, parking, pedestrianisation, recreation, recycling, regional connectivity, renewable energy, roads, sporting and nonsporting facilities, supports for mental health, traffic, waterways—especially along the river Shannon, and youth facilities and services. There were also mentions for Shannon airport, Foynes port and the dockland area.

- **Crime, Security and Safety**

It could be argued that the flip side to public infrastructure and services is a concern with crime, security and safety. The absence of appropriate supports and services for vulnerable groups may result in unwanted consequences.

LIMERICK CHALLENGES

Concerns about crime, security and safety were the second biggest challenge identified by participants. Amongst these, anti- Social behaviour was the biggest concern, with further references to drugs, violence and animal cruelty. In particular, the responses revealed a keen awareness that some areas are not considered safe and of the need for greater Garda presence.

- **Investment and Economic development**

The economic strategy advanced in the *Limerick 2030* plan proposes the need for all interventions, 'whether hard physical infrastructure or softer business development programmes', to 'pull in the same direction and reinforce each other'. The proposed interconnection between alternative elements in Limerick's economic revival are strongly supported by the responses of our participants. Whilst we have unpacked the different sets of challenges referred to in our survey, our participants invariably bundled their concerns together. In this respect, just as providing public services and addressing concerns about crime and security may be seen as flip sides of the same coin; concerns about investment and economic development were typically bundled with concerns about uneven development and the development of Limerick city

- **Uneven development**

The responses concerning uneven development were many and varied. Whilst unemployment was frequently cited as the primary concern, uneven development was often considered the primary cause. In our reading of the responses, divisions between the city and the county appear more likely as the symptom of uneven development, not a cause of division in and of themselves. Many responses expressed a desire for greater unity between developmental initiatives in the county and the city. Concerns were expressed that the county's development is ignored and suggestions were made for improved rural infrastructure especially in relation to public transport and roads.

Additionally, there was a strong sense of the need to counteract the economic, cultural, and political dominance of Dublin. Many responses noted the need for greater regional coordination in the Mid-West (Limerick, Clare, Tipperary, and Kerry), regarding both the need to support local industry and attract foreign investment.

- **Development of the City centre**

So many responses referred specifically to the city centre as a specific challenge, we included this as a distinctive category in its own right.

Three inter-related themes prevailed: first, a very negative view of the city centre - a place that is 'dead', 'dull' or 'dying'; second, that it is a city that 'closes down' in the evening after work and not a place where people live; and third, the 'donut' effect of developments and shopping centres around the edge of the city, which hollow out the potential to develop a critical mass for change.

LIMERICK CHALLENGES

A number of comments suggested that development in the city had focused on business and retail with little thought given to making it a liveable city through the building of mixed use developments and the creation of city centre accommodation. Many cited the need to make the city centre an attractive place to *live in* not just *work in.* Concrete suggestions for how this might be achieved were reflected in a small number of responses concerned with Limerick's challenge to promote arts, culture and heritage.

- **Arts, Culture and Heritage**

Whilst responses citing challenges concerning arts, culture and heritage were the smallest category in this survey, they tended to include the most specific recommendations: funding and investment in arts, culture and heritage was the key challenge identified. Some responses cited the need for a greater number and variety of cultural events, but many pointed to the architectural heritage and Limerick's Georgian and medieval areas as under-valued cultural assets. The historical connections of Limerick's waterways and the Shannon were also mentioned as potential cultural assets.

- **Mindset and Attitude**

We created this category because so many of the answers we received related to ideas about the attitude of people in Limerick, which, whenever it was referred to, was viewed as negative.

> *"The city (and, to a great extent, the county) suffers from a level of poor self-esteem that would result in prolonged therapy if it were a person"*

Although a relatively small sub-set of our survey, for around 1 in 10, there is a fatalism about Limerick, about its future and about its people. Added to this, almost twice as many people are concerned with outside perceptions of Limerick.

- **Perception of Limerick**

In the 1990s, Limerick dealt with the damaging reputation as 'stab city'. This was surpassed in the early 2000s by a national media fascination with Limerick crime gangs and later re-confirmed by efforts at 'Limerick regeneration'. The absence of a strong counter-narrative has meant that many Limerick people still believe that Limerick's reputation is a significant challenge.

- **Engagement**

Respondents in this category reported feeling that they are not being listened to in pointless and/or poor public consultation exercises. It was also suggested that various communities in Limerick need to engage more and overcome their distrust of each other.

LIMERICK CHALLENGES

- **Community Well-Being, Access, Equality and Inclusion**

This category reflected a number of responses, often in relation to services and amenities, but concerning *access* to them, not the *availability* of them. Several responses referred to Limerick being 'socially divided'. Words like 'classism', 'racism' and 'inequality" were used. Lots of solutions were offered regarding improving access to existing amenities and better representation for minorities. A number of comments referred to the need to invest in mental and social health and it was suggested that the value of community is an under-utilised resource. There was also as a call to celebrate the good work being done in communities though some responses noted that many Limerick residents have *'a sense of belonging to the local community but not to the city as a whole'.* The challenge to be inclusive was variously articulated as was the challenge to recognise local communities as an important element in a wider inclusion strategy.

Key take aways

- ♦ Limerick people tend to identify the same challenges as Limerick leaders.

- ♦ Most of the challenges identified by Limerick people are already addressed in the *Limerick 2030* plan.

- ♦ The interconnections between challenges and the need to acknowledge the complexity of the response are equally recognised by Limerick people and the Limerick 2030 plan.

- ♦ The evident consensus between local government and Limerick people regarding the main challenges for the city is not being harnessed in any positive way to address identified challenges.

- ♦ A strong consensus about the challenges faced by Limerick needs to be matched by an equally strong counter-narrative about what is best about Limerick.

- ♦ The Limerick 2030 plan identified the need to develop a positive Limerick narra-tive. This report identifies a need to share that positive narrative with Limerick people.

FOCUSING THE DIRECTLY ELECTED MAYOR

Below is a summary of all of the insights revealed by our consultation.

- Limerick people want a change from the current system of governance

- Limerick people are potentially engaged citizens but many feel left out.

- General scepticism and low level of regard for the council and local politicians.

- The new local government arrangement needs to better communicate with local communities to address the deficit in confidence regarding local politicians and local government

- The DEM should be more concerned with *the system of local government* than with any one area of interest over another.

- Building a positive 'place proposition', that is, a confident self-awareness of what is positive about Limerick is regarded as a key factor in Limerick's rejuvenation.

- The current place proposition strategy needs more support to create the necessary buy-in from Limerick people.

- Limerick people tend to identify the same challenges as Limerick leaders.

- Most of the challenges identified by Limerick people are already addressed in the *Limerick 2030* plan.

- Limerick challenges are inter-connected and so are the policy responses: the need to acknowledge the complexity of the response is equally recognised by Limerick people and the Limerick 2030 plan.

- The consensus between local government and Limerick people regarding the main challenges for the city is not being harnessed in any positive way to address identified challenges.

- A strong consensus about the challenges faced by Limerick needs to be matched by an equally strong counter-narrative about what is best about Limerick.

- The Limerick 2030 plan identified the need to develop a positive Limerick narrative. This report identifies a need to share that positive narrative with Limerick people.

CONCLUSIONS

All around the world, democratic institutions and systems of government are under threat. Ireland is fortunate in not having to face the worst of popular public disapproval and anti-democratic movements. But this is no time for complacency. In the centralised system of government which exists in this country, the powers of local government are limited and its funding is tight. It is therefore, not surprising that in the current climate of rising populism and declining trust in politicians, local government struggles to maintain its reputation.

This consultation confirms that view. It reveals that many Limerick people are sceptical and cynical of local government and local politicians. What it also reveals, however, is that Limerick people think that local government can be better. For hard-working local government officials and politicians, this may be a hard message to hear, but it is an important one. Limerick people have not lost faith in democratic systems and processes. For the most part, they view the establishment of a Directly Elected Mayor as an opportunity to improve local government and deliver local services.

In view of the demands for increased accountability and increased representation and the evident information deficit about local government plans and activities, the establishment of a DEM presents an opportunity to address these accountability and informational gaps in public perception and understanding.

Limerick's DEM presents an opportunity for a new role—somewhere between an Ombudsman and Programme Manager. A public figure head providing representation, but also an independent authority able to examine concerns where communities and/or individuals feel that they have been treated unfairly. In this way, the DEM could provide the public with an impartial account of the progress of local initiatives, providing an important mediation between local government and the public in terms of explaining programme delivery, listening to local concerns and providing account of progress, possible delays or changes etc. In addition to providing accountability, the DEM could also be charged with overall responsibility for monitoring the delivery of proposed changes, projects and initiatives. In doing so, establishing a regular cycle to report on progress and to receive feedback from the public would be crucial to securing greater public support.