

National Oversight & Audit Commission (NOAC)

Best Practice in Local Government

by Ciarán Hayes

Introduction

The National Oversight & Audit Commission was established in 2014 under the Local Government Reform Act, 2014 as an independent oversight body of the Irish Local Government sector. In existence now for 10-years, it operates its oversight function by measuring each Local Authority's performance through 45 Performance Indicators (PIs) under 11 headings. Data returned by the Authorities are validated by the Commission annually, following which it is used in a scrutiny process for 6-7 Councils each year.

All Performance Indicator and Scrutiny Reports are available on the NOAC website www.noac.ie, which is now a reservoir of data lending itself to a trend analysis across the various functions.

While the PI, validation, and scrutiny process is intended to highlight areas where Local Authorities are lagging behind, it also serves to highlight best practice across a broad range of policy and functional areas and innovative projects. This Briefing looks at a number of these examples and will be of interest to senior management across the Local Government sector and senior policy makers across multiple Government Departments who rely on the sector to implement national policy at local level.

Local Government provides over 1,100 services on behalf of multiple Government Departments. The best practice examples highlighted in this Briefing not only seek to demonstrate the range and variety of services provided across several Government Departments and policy areas, but the extensive range of challenges faced by the sector. Data for the Briefing has been drawn from presentations made by the individual Councils and the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) at NOAC Good Practice events and can be accessed at www.noac.ie.

Case Study1: Wicklow County Council Solar Car Port.

As with all Local Authorities, Wicklow County Council is obliged by the National Climate Action Plan to increase its energy efficiency by 50% and reduce its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 51% by 2030. Having undertaken a detailed energy audit of the Council headquarters in 2018, County Buildings was

identified as the fourth largest energy user behind public lighting, transport, and the four swimming pools.

An option identified to assist the achievement of the target and reduce the Council carbon footprint was the substitution of 40% of the fossil fuel energy consumption with a renewable solar energy alternative. Installing solar panels on the roof to achieve this aim – as had been done by other Councils – was ruled out due to overshadowing, and it was instead decided to install a Solar Car Port in the Council headquarters car park in Wicklow.

Covering a total of 103 parking places as depicted in Photo 1 below, the solar carport while a common feature across Europe, is the largest to date in Ireland with a 300kW peak system capacity.



Photo 1. Wicklow County Council Solar Carport.

Ideally located with an exposed southern aspect, the carport is located adjoining County Buildings, Fire Station, and Machinery Yard, and is across the road from the Council owned swimming pool.

Once the decision had been made to proceed with the carport option, the focus then turned to implementation and resolving issues of planning, funding, procurement, contract negotiations and installation. Planning proceeded through the Part 8 process and was completed in 2019. Rather than fund the project itself, the Council opted for a Power Purchase Contract whereby the infrastructure

would be provided by a private entity who would retain ownership of the solar panels, with the power generated by the system being purchased by the Council at an agreed rate per kilowatt hour for the defined period.

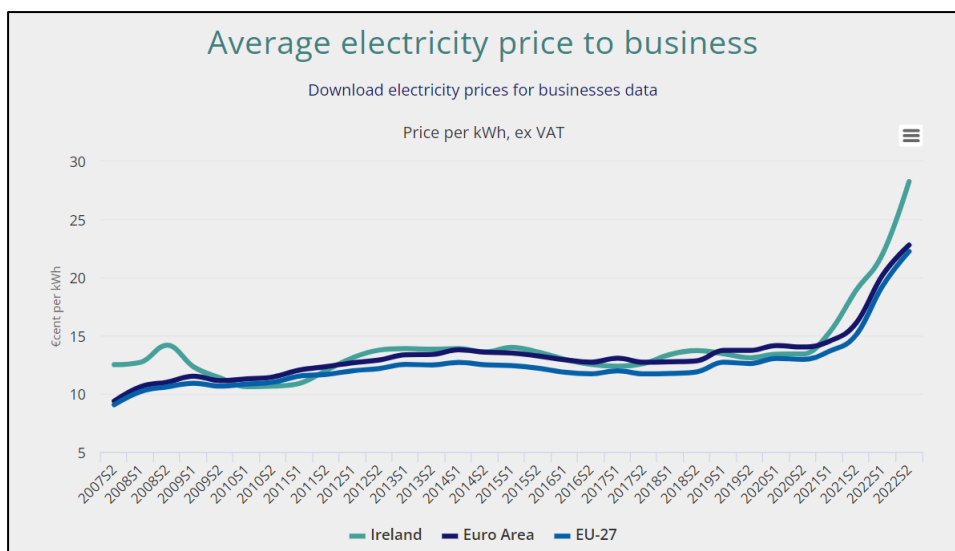
While issues arising in the Planning process could be anticipated and managed, the financial issues presented more difficult challenges. At the time of project implementation in 2020, the unit price of solar off the grid was €0.0735/kW. When the cost of the steel structure was factored in however, the unit cost of power from the system increased to €0.1195/kW.

Deciding to proceed on a financial assessment alone could have compromised the entire project, but as it related to compliance with national Climate Action Plan policies, it was appropriate to factor in the replacement of fossil fuels with renewable energy and the need to reduce carbon emissions.

Having regard to the cost, the next issue of concern was its appeal to the private sector and whether they would be enticed to bid for the project through the procurement process. This issue was overcome by the Council agreeing to pay for all energy produced by the panels, with a minimum payment for 270,000kWh per annum i.e. €32,265 @ unit rate of €0.1195. An inflation adjustment clause was also removed from the Local Energy Supply Agreement (LESC) contract.

Three valid tenders were received at procurement stage, two from Ireland and one from Italy, with EnerPower, a Waterford company being the successful bidder. A Design, Install, Finance, Operate, and Maintain Contract was signed in December 2020, work started on site in May '21 with a power supply commencing to the Council in April '22. The contract provided for the Council to purchase the power from the system for a period of 20-years.

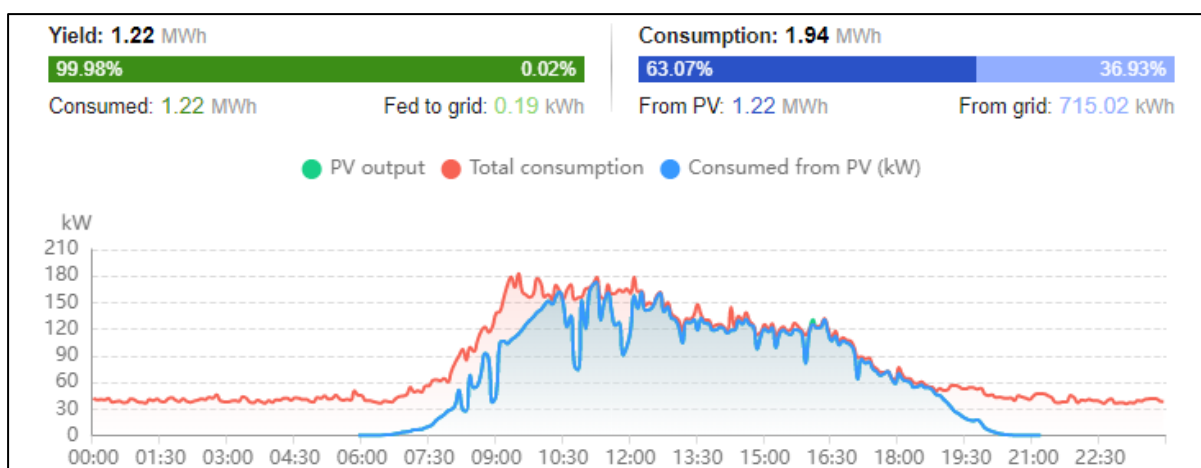
Notwithstanding the cost concerns at the outset of the project, the unit price of electricity at the time of contract signing in 2020 remained at under 15Cent. Subsequent global events however saw day rates for electricity increase by over 400% as indicated in Graph 1 below, with the green line depicting the average energy price to business.



Graph 1. Average Electricity Price to Business.¹

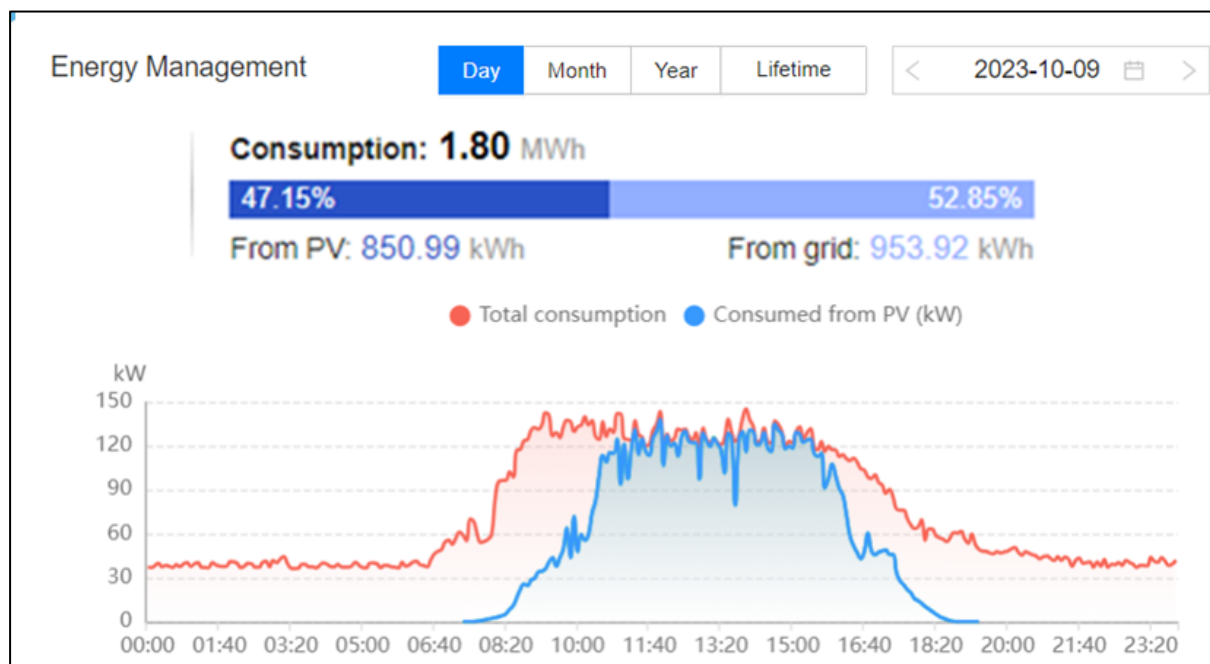
Graph 2 is a screen grab from Council's solar system indicating the power generated in mid-summer 2023, while Graph 3 relates to a day in October '23.

The red lines show the energy consumed by the building over a 24-hour period and on the left, the base load of the building at Circa 30kW. Demand increases at around 7am daily before dropping back to the base load at about 8pm. In contrast, the blue line shows the energy consumed by the building from the solar panels and despite Graph 3 being in respect of an October day, it indicates 47% of the building's energy needs were met by the solar system on that day with the balance of 53% coming from the grid.



Graph 2. System Power Generation, Mid-summer '23

¹ Source: <https://www.seai.ie/data-and-insights/seai-statistics/key-statistics/prices/>



Graph 3. System Power Generation, October '23

Summary and Conclusions.

The system is deemed a success with some 68% of the solar energy generated used by the building at a cost of €15,000 in comparison to a cost of Circa €40,000 from the grid. In the year to October '23, 45% of the building energy used was from the solar system, exceeding the design aim. As of August, '23, the commercial day rate per kW was €0.3168, while the Council was paying €0.1195 per kW. Thus the passage of time rendered the additional cost for the steel structure to be a worthwhile investment.

On the negative side, 32% of the solar energy was unused in 2023 and was redistributed to the grid with the Council receiving no recompense for the electricity returned. Had the Council been in a position to use the electricity, it would have had a value of €7,000 in reduced energy bills plus the equivalent amount in reduced carbon emissions. While an application to export the excess solar power was submitted, the site was not considered eligible for export due to the size of the array being too large for the Small Scale Generation regulations.

Alternatively, the Council could have used the electricity for its public swimming pool located across the road (see Photo 2 below). As the network would have to cross a public road however, it would have the effect of creating a private network or 'private wire'. Such practices are restricted to limit the ability of private entities running their own electricity cable to transfer electricity between their

own proprietary generation and demand sites, thus avoiding the national electricity grid charges and associated standing charges.



Photo 2. Solar Car Port with Wicklow Public Swimming Pool across the road.

While it appears Wicklow County Council has identified a system blockage that requires attention if the ambitious National Climate Action Plan targets are to be achieved, the initiative is considered a success overall with the increased energy efficiency and performance justifying the decision to proceed notwithstanding the initial financial analysis.

Lessons and benefits from the best practice initiative of one County Council has the capacity to be scaled up and spread across the wider public service. A major function of the Office of Public Works (OPW) relates to the sourcing, provision, upkeep and maintenance of Government Department offices across the country, many of which have the capacity to install solar panels either on the roof of buildings or in large adjoining surface car parks. Rather than each Government Department or public sector agency pursuing an initiative similar to Wicklow County Council, the OPW could affect greater energy efficiency and emission reduction progress through the procurement of a power purchase contract for a combination of appropriate sites, thus achieving greater value for money in the process.

The full Wicklow County Council presentation can be found at <https://www.noac.ie/good-practice-in-local-government-seminar-2023/>.

Case Study 2: Dublin City Council Staff Recruitment Campaign.

Local Government and the wider public sector is in an unenviable position. At times of economic growth as currently being experienced, staff recruitment and retention present significant challenges due to the lure of private sector salaries and conditions. In contrast, public sector jobs are more attractive at times of economic recession only for such times to coincide with a recruitment embargo and, as in the case of the post 2008 financial crisis, a demand for a reduction in staff numbers.

Gone are the days of the public sector being the employer of choice and it's clear that the Gen Z workforce does not assign the same priority as previous generations to the benefits of permanent and pensionable employment.

Recruitment of administrative, engineering and technical staff is well regulated and process driven, providing little flexibility for deviation. Despite enhancement of their social media presence, promotion of employee benefits, development of employee onboarding and tools, engagement with market and stakeholders, and a focus on being an employer of choice, staff recruitment and retention continued to be a challenge for Dublin City Council.

While the Council considered the default option of running large scale recruitment campaigns with the attendant large resource requirement, it felt an alternative approach was required due to the large time lapse involved in the creation of a panel, offer of employment to successful candidates, and ultimate appointment. A different approach was required.

The Council thus focussed on two separate areas where they had greater latitude beyond the formal process that could facilitate delivery of the over 1,100 services while also contributing to local communities, particularly communities in disadvantaged areas. They were a targeted recruitment campaign for operational staff, and creation of a General Operative Traineeship Programme, areas that were made more challenging throughout the Covid-19 era.

For the targeted recruitment campaign, the Council focussed on quicker localised campaigns in areas of socio-economic challenges containing DEIS schools and with high youth unemployment. Working

through the local Council offices, all of whom provide local community, housing and environmental services, the Council was able to tap into the contacts the offices had with local employment services and networks within the areas. Opportunities for collaboration with the local services were identified by the Council whereby it could present itself as an employer of choice while contributing positively to some of the socio-economic challenges present in the areas.

Through the operation of the Partnership process, positive Trade Union support was received. Elected Members similarly welcomed the initiative enthusiastically, as did the Operational Departments who provided key staff for information sessions and interview boards.

At local level, support was forthcoming from the North East Inner City (NEIC) and Ballymun schools, Local Employment Service, Ballymun Job Centre, and North West Area Partnership and NEIC Task Force. All of the local agencies and groups provided a link to their clients, facilitated information sessions, assisted their clients with the application and interview process and preparation for interview, and provided facilities for interview.

While the support was consistent in the north inner city and Ballymun, the approach differed somewhat in each area. In the north inner city, key staff went into the schools to explain and demonstrate the benefits, opportunities, learning and development, and career path progression from entry level to managerial level. Similar information was provided to the local employment services who were also advised of how the application and interview process would operate, thus giving them the opportunity of working with their clients in preparation for interview.

In contrast, an open session with similar information was provided in Ballymun supported by the North West Area Partnership and Ballymun Job Centre and attended by over 100 people.

As a result of the recruitment drive, some 286 applications were received from the two areas, of which 152 candidates presented for interview. A panel of 115 successful candidates – representing a success rate of 75% - was formed with over 80 appointed to date and with the geographic location of the candidates being taken into account on appointment.

The second initiative of a traineeship and apprenticeship programme to provide skilled employees to Dublin City Council emanated from discussions with the Council Members and Trade Unions. Development of the programme however required a different collaboration to that of the targeted

recruitment campaign. In this case, the Council engaged with the City of Dublin Education & Training Board (CDETB) who in turn linked it with the Ballyfermot Educational Training Centre (ETC).

Developing the programme with Ballyfermot ETC required the identification of the relevant skills required by the Council. Once identified, they were cross-referenced with the ETC certified courses. Hard landscaping, concreting, paving, driving, safe pass, health and safety skills were identified as suitable for a 10-week course following which the attendees would be placed in the Council for a further 10 week on-the-job training programme.

With a limit of 14 places at any one time, Ballyfermot ETC has completed two programmes. Of the 28 trainees, 23 came through successfully and were placed in Dublin City operational Departments of Housing Maintenance, Roads Maintenance, and Parks & Landscape Services, who agreed to participate and accommodate the trainees within their workforce. Of those 23 placements, 20 have progressed into a one-year fixed term contract following assessment with a view ultimately to full time employment within Dublin City Council.

Summary and Conclusion.

By any standards, the recruitment drive was a success as it provided Dublin City Council with much needed staff in front line operational departments delivering critical local services. Of greater importance however, the initiative strengthened ties with the local communities and provided much needed employment opportunities in socio-economically challenged areas. Measurement of goodwill is inherently difficult and not something that can be accurately captured in a cost benefit analysis. Despite that, the connection forged between Dublin City Council and its' local communities arising from the initiative can only be described as positive, and an initiative that could be replicated by other Council administrations.

Looked at from a different perspective however, it could be interpreted as a modern adaptation of past practices when Local Authorities traditionally had a practice of hiring local people for such operational roles. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

The full Dublin City Council presentation can be found at <https://www.noac.ie/good-practice-in-local-government-seminar-2023/>.

Case Study 3: Local Government Response to the Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis.

News cycles are generally dominated by the conflict of the day. Good news doesn't sell. Protests and protesters seeking headlines often make claims of a lack of consultation or communication. Little is heard of what is actually done, with promoters of projects and schemes instead left chasing the headlines.

Such is the case with the Ukraine humanitarian crisis, the background and context of which is the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February '22 resulting in over 12 million Ukrainians being dislocated from their land. Addressing the issue from an Irish perspective, the Department of Children, Equality, Diversity, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) led an all of Government response in which the Local Government sector played a major role. In turn, the Local Government response was coordinated and led by the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA), headed by Ms. Niamh McCarthy, National Coordinator for Emergency Housing Delivery (Ukraine) unit.

This case study, presented at the NOAC Good Practice in Local Government event in October '22, delves into the detail, nature, complexity, and scale of the response by the sector. It's a 'behind-the-scenes' glimpse into stories that rarely make the headlines.

As with many responses to an emergency, the first phase is often a 'Reaction' phase, and the establishment of Rest Centres throughout the country fell into this category. It allowed for the provision of immediate emergency housing by Local Authorities while efforts to identify more suitable and medium term accommodation could be sourced.

In total, some 32 Rest Centres were established to provide for the immediate needs of the Ukrainians with the process requiring innovation, creativity, and inclusiveness to ensure delivery in the short term. One such Rest Centre included in the Good Practice case study was the Ballyogan Rest Centre developed by Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council (see below), which is indicative of the comprehensive yet flexible nature of Local Government's response to major national emergencies and of their contribution and value as a public service.

At an international level, Ireland was expected to play its role along with its EU counterparts and provide accommodation and supports notwithstanding the well-publicised housing shortage within the State. As of October '22, some 58,000 Ukrainian refugees had arrived in Ireland, 43,200 requiring not only accommodation, but considerable additional support due to language, education,

employment, medical and other challenges. 12,300 were enrolled in schools at primary and secondary level.

Coordinated by the LGMA, advice sheets were developed for staff throughout the Local Government sector, all 31 Local Authorities of whom were required to respond to the emergency with each county required to house a number of refugees. In preparation for the response, services were mapped at a local level and an assessment process was formulated.

The assessment process was to evolve over the 7 months of operation and together with a general identification of needs, it included language requirements, work skills, health needs, qualifications and educational attainment. Advice sheets were developed for staff in facilities receiving refugees and how to prepare to receive their guests, as the refugees were referred to.

Central to the response effort was local development companies, and the Councils also coordinated with the Irish Red Cross housing pledge process to determine the availability of existing vacant housing accommodation. A total of 10,500 pledged houses were assessed by the Councils.

Welcome packs were provided in collaboration with Local Development Companies, tailored for individual Rest Centres, with information on all services provided within the local area. Sanitary packs were sourced and distributed as were supermarket vouchers. Information on childcare, passport, driving licences, right to work, banking, travel, social work, and other service were provided. Communication tools were developed, apps were used for language barriers, printed information was provided in a multilingual format, and web portals and dedicated e-mails were established.

Similarly for the hosting communities, information leaflets were distributed and webinars were held to provide the necessary information.

Having gone through the 'React' phase, Councils then moved into a 'Support' phase. Of particular importance in this phase was the establishment of a Community Forum in each Local Authority area, the model for which was essentially demand led and had to be continually reviewed to ensure the needs of the guests were being appropriately addressed.

The Library service became critical and central to the response as they provided wordless books to help with language skills and to encourage reading. Free online language classes were held as well as

conversational English classes. Ukrainian books were made available and storytelling sessions were organised.

Free Wi-Fi, scanning and printing facilities were made available. Council's recruited Integration Development Officers to ensure appropriate integration by all stakeholders. Recruitment fairs were organised for the guests, and County Task groups were established to address key priorities of well-being, digital divide, and dealing with the youth.

Councils worked with Local Link to establish new public transport routes to service the Rest Centres. Fingal County Council provided a free 'Bleeper Bike' service, and Limerick City & County Council set up a bicycle hub in collaboration with Active Travel. The hub initiative included the repair for use of damaged bicycles and the initiative started with a donation of 19 bicycles provided by An Garda Síochána. Individuals Councils availed of financing for some of the initiatives from the dormant accounts programme.

In turn, the 'Support' phase was followed by the 'Community' phase, which was notable again for the central role of Local Authorities in facilitating a welcome for the guests and their integration as far as possible into the community. National play dates, summer camps, and classes were organised as were Ukrainian fun days for families and 'Festivals in the Van' as a way of bringing arts and entertainment out to communities. Mná ag Gáire, an NGO, adjusted their activities to become a focal point and provided pop-up shops. Yoga and Zumba classes were organised.

It was by any standard, an enormous logistical undertaking.

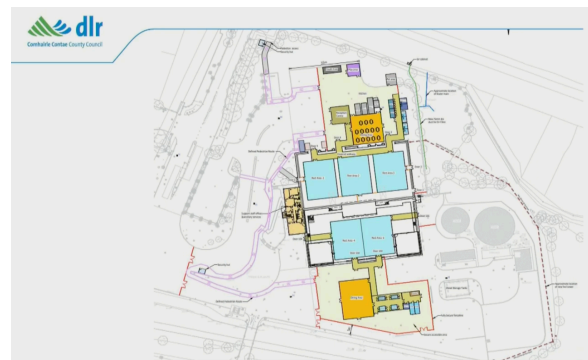
Ballyogan Regional Rest Centre.

Up to six rest centres existed within the region which comprised of the Dublin Councils plus Wicklow and Kildare County Councils, and it was decided to consolidate resources in one centre to make it easier to manage and facilitate input from other agencies such as the Civil Defence and volunteers, all of whom were stretched over the existing centres. The Ballyogan facility was in the ownership of Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, close to amenities of shopping centres, LUAS, and other transport options for travel to the city.

A team was established to deliver a temporary Rest Centre to accommodate up to 300 guests for short periods of 1 – 3 days. It was decided to install marquee tents within the building owing to its industrial scale and associated difficulty in heating. It also facilitated management of the facility and provided an extra level of privacy for families. All marquees were connected through covered walkways to the reception area, external kitchen, laundry, toilet, shower, and other services. Each marquee had the capacity to cater for up to 60 people and included recreation rooms for children connected by the walkways. Once inside, it had the appearance of a canopied village with the external appearance of the industrial type facility unseen.



Ballyogan Regional Rest Centre. – Facility



Ballyogan Regional Rest Centre – Internal Layout

DLR's team was divided into two sections, one to undertake construction and the second to deal with the ongoing management and operation of the facility. A target was set of having 180 beds open within a three week period with the facility aiming for full capacity within five weeks. Emergency Executive Orders were required to facilitate construction as it would not have been possible to go through the normal procurement and tendering process due to the multiplicity of contractors required within such a tight timescale. Notwithstanding the challenges, Appropriate Assessment screening and Garda vetting was undertaken .



First Marquee to be erected with the facility.

On completion of construction, the operation and management took priority and for this, two managers were appointed, one for the normal operation and maintenance of the facility which was run on a 24-hour basis, and the other for ongoing social care of the guests. The Council was able to draw on the diversity of skillsets within its own organisation to assist with the social care aspect comprising staff from the Community, Library, Arts, Engineering and other sections with the Council. Additional staff was however required and for this function, it was important that the recruitment had regard to a need for a social care background in the applicants. All new staff underwent the Garda vetting procedure, and all were provided with 'children first' training.

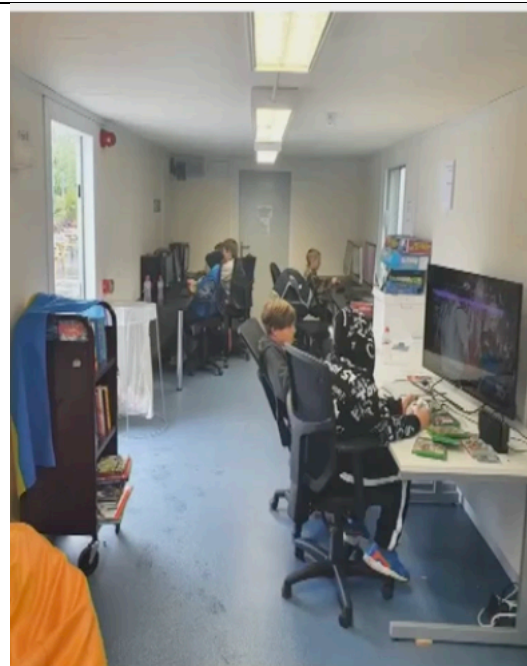
One of the requirements was the provision of good quality furniture, particularly beds. Due to the trauma already endured and the need for the guests to feel welcome, camp beds were not considered appropriate. Similarly, many guests arrived with little to nothing in terms of clothing and possessions. Given those circumstances, the provision of good laundry facilities was necessary and well used, with numerous washing machines having to be replaced over time. Interestingly, the Ukrainians were not used to the use of tumble driers and had to be trained in their use.



Laundry Facilities

Documentation and information leaflets were not only translated into Ukrainian in accordance with LGMA requirements, but also translated into Russian. The detail didn't end there. Play areas for the children were provided with basketball nets, hopscotch plans were drawn out on the pavement, and a computer room provided for teenagers. Bicycles and scooters were donated, dance, yoga, and tai chi classes organised. Board games and cuddly toys were provided with chess proving particularly popular. Trips were organised to the Zoo, Croke Park, the circus, and tickets were arranged for the Garth Brooks concert.





Childrens bikes, scooters, board games and teenagers computer room.

As the centre evolved, reading rooms were provided for the adults together with work space and Microsoft came in with support in the form of training courses. English classes were organised initially in the centre but later relocated to a nearby Leisure Centre where guests could also avail of public transport access to the City. Staff sensed a reluctance for the guests to move off-site due to a feeling of safety and security and were somewhat reluctant to explore Dublin further. The nearby Leisure Centre option acted as a prompt for them to both explore and further integrate into the community.

Summary and Conclusion.

That people did not want to leave on account of the safety and security they felt is a testament to the lengths the Council went to welcome the guests. Attention to detail was not solely left to the initial planning for the centre either, but continued throughout its operation with necessary adjustments made such as the work space for adults and layout adjustments to the centre due to the onset of Covid.

Ultimately it was the experience of the families that told the real story. Kids were buzzing around on their scooters and bikes that they got attached to and brought with them when they moved on, parents played basketball with their children, and a new Irish citizen was welcomed among the 2,100 that had stayed there by October '22 with the birth of a baby on site.

The Irish Refugee Council and UN Refugee Agency were regular visitors resulting in the Centre being cited as best practice around Europe. Ballyogan Rest Centre was in effect an all-of-community effort led by Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council in a manner that reflected well on the Irish community and the Local Government sector.

Local Government responds to emergencies on an ongoing basis with a different response required on each occasion. Whether it's a severe weather event, 2008 global financial crisis, Covid-19, or now the Ukrainian refugee crisis, the sector has delivered and it's important to recognise that delivery.

The full LGMA presentation can be found at <https://www.noac.ie/good-practice-in-local-government-seminar-2022/>.