

# Public

## Taking local government forward

Shaun Gallagher, the new chair of the Association for Public Service Excellence, explains to Jane Dudman the unique set up of the organisation and how its dual role of elected members and officers gives both sides the chance to voice their views

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**Jane Dudman**

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There are many organisations that seek to promulgate good practice in local government. The Association for Public Service Excellence (Apse) is a little different from other bodies, in that it includes both elected local politicians and officials, in 260 UK councils.

Its new chair, councillor Shaun Gallagher, explains that this dual role gives the organisation a real opportunity for both sides to air their views and reflect on the policies that will take local government forward: an aim needed now more than ever, against the backdrop of impending harsh public sector spending cuts.

"Local government is feeling the pressures of the credit crunch and Apse has a key role in providing best value and the expertise of its offer and the information provided to its membership," he comments. "I believe its role will increase. Local government will be looking for good advice and expertise. Apse is unique in that its membership is composed of both elected members and officers and that gives officers an opportunity to hear the views of elected members. That does happen in local government, but not always at a strategic level. I'm a big supporter of Apse; I think it's very useful."



Shaun Gallagher

Gallagher has a long-standing career in local politics in Northern Ireland. He is a councillor at Derry city council, which has a population of 120,000 people and an annual budget of £56m. He is a former mayor of Derry city council and has service as chair of its environment board. He is also vice chair of the Strategic Waste Authority for Northern Ireland, which has a £200m budget, and has a keen interest in environmental issues. In his first speech in his new role to the Apse conference last month, Gallagher said he wanted to see Apse continue to be at the forefront of helping local authorities meet the considerable challenges faced by climate change and the need for more sustainable development.

He also wants to see a greater role on the European stage for the organisation and emphasised the importance of representing the interests of Apse members from all parts of the UK, who face, he pointed out, "diverse issues".

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One issue being faced in Northern Ireland is local government reorganisation, with the number of authorities falling from 26 to 11. "We are working through major government transformation and it is a real learning curve, but from our point of view, it is a great asset to be chair of Apse at this time, enabling us to call on the organisation's expertise and, in particular, its research," he says.

"Every region is unique and has its own personality. In Northern Ireland we are coming at this after 30 years of conflict. I believe we will get there and then other areas will be able to look at us and perhaps learn from us."

One issue faced by all councils is of course the impact of the economic downturn. Gallagher's take on this is that it makes it more important than ever to deal honestly with the general public. "I'm a great believer in giving people all the facts, so they know what the issues are," he comments.

As chair of Apse, Gallagher says his role is to facilitate discussion and provide the expertise of the organisation out to all its members. "I'm used to being flexible, but firm at the same time, to get the work done," he says. While he is a big supporter of Apse, Gallagher is all too aware of the challenges facing both local government as a whole and a member organisation like Apse, as we head into hard times. "You'd need to ask a psychiatrist why I want to do this job," he jokes, "particularly given the stressful times ahead."

But commitment to an active role in local politics, no matter how difficult the challenges, has been part of Gallagher's life for the past couple of decades, and he's not likely to be giving up any time soon. He points to former US president Bill Clinton as a real role model, particularly during the peace process. "Clinton took a very active role," comments Gallagher. "Without his intervention, I sometimes think we'd still be shooting at one another. I admire the risks he took to bring people round the table."

Gallagher is clear on the need for real leadership in tough times. "You're not elected to make popular decisions, you're elected to make the right decisions," he says.

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