

Limerick Regeneration – A Review 2007-2012



Mr. John Fitzgerald

In April 2007 I delivered my report, *Addressing Issues of Social Exclusion in Moyross and other disadvantaged areas of Limerick City*, to the Irish Government's Cabinet Sub-Committee on Social Exclusion. This followed a request from Government to me in November 2006 to advise on an initiative to address these issues, following the tragic burning of two children, as they sat in their mother's car in Pineview Gardens, Moyross on 10th September 2006¹.

As the five year term of the Regeneration Agencies established as part of that initiative ended in June 2012, it is timely to give some personal reflections on what has, and has not, been achieved in the interim period. It is also an opportunity to highlight some of the challenges that remain and key issues that need to be addressed in the next phase.

Introduction

It has been well documented over the past decade that there are many difficulties and challenges facing the communities in Moyross, Southill, Ballinacurra Weston and St Marys Park (see Figure 1); the majority of which became apparent to me during the time I spent with these communities, and the various local groups, in late 2006 and early 2007. These include: serious criminal activity, anti-social behaviour, high unemployment², high proportion of one-parent families, significant educational disadvantage, high levels of drug-use and, stemming from this, intense negative publicity. As highlighted in my 2007 report, the problems in these Limerick

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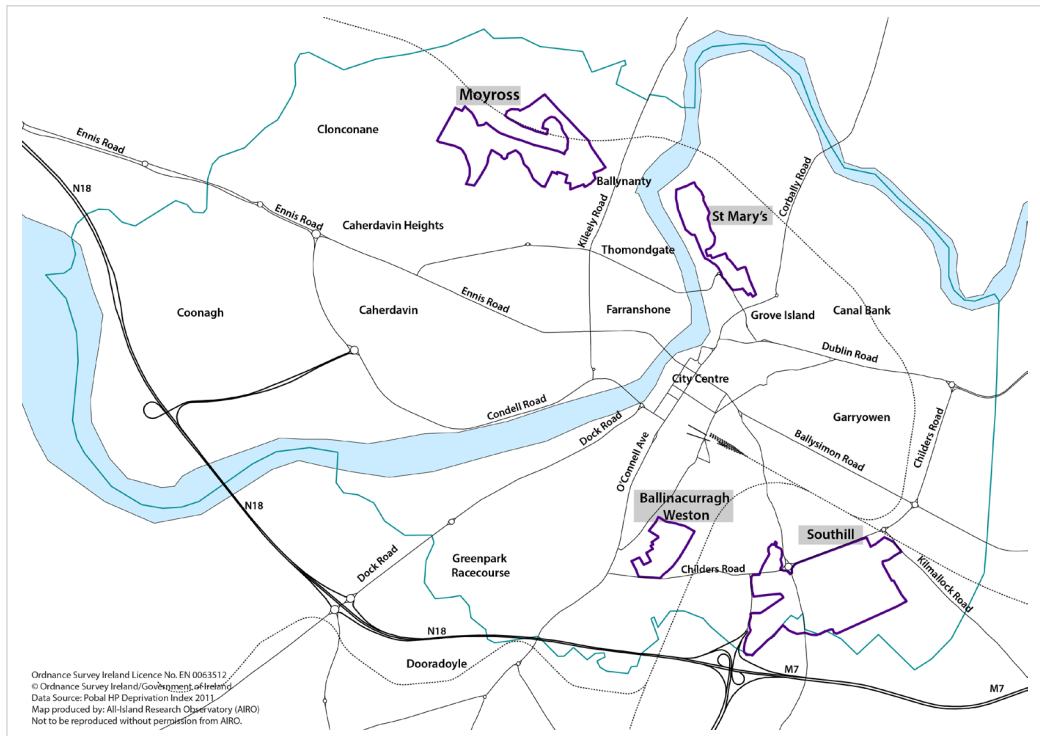
estates did not start in 2006, or even in the previous decade, but can be dated back to the early 1970s when these emerging problems were already being highlighted by such people as the late Jim Kemmy, T.D in the Dáil Debates of the time.

Within this context it was never realistic, nor ever promised, that all these long festering problems could be resolved in a timeframe of five years; the lifespan of the two regeneration agencies established by the Government in June 2007. The problems in these estates were problems arising from long-term neglect. They were deep-rooted, systemic, and long-standing. While I met with many local groups and public officials at the time, one of my abiding memories of that time in late 2006 was of attending meetings of residents in Moyross and Southill. Where I was expecting anger and frustration, I found mainly a subdued sense of resignation – born no doubt of the fact that these people had seen in the past many new initiatives and official announcements that had led nowhere. Therefore, there was little or no expectation that this initiative would be any different.

The resulting *Fitzgerald Report* grouped the challenges under three main headings:

- The threat arising from the serious criminal activity of a few families in these areas, which was undermining the confidence of the communities and the potential of Limerick City more generally;
- The urgency of developing coordinated responses to the problems of social and educational disadvantage in the areas, which if neglected would inevitably lead to a further cycle of criminality and disadvantage; and

Figure 1: Map of the Limerick Regeneration Area



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- The need for economic and infrastructural regeneration to unlock value, improve access, and create a better public / private housing mix.

To address these issues in a coordinated and focused way, I recommended the establishment of two regeneration agencies for a number of reasons, but not least because of the history of distrust among these local communities and local government in Limerick.

The proposed agencies had to be established as a matter of urgency to address problems that at that time were spiralling out of control. A small team of officials had to be quickly put in place in the agencies – some of whom would need extensive experience of similar projects outside Limerick, while others would have a detailed knowledge of local community and social issues. This knowledge and

expertise would prove to be invaluable in achieving early momentum for the initiative. From a very early stage the two regeneration agencies, Limerick Northside Regeneration and Limerick Southside Regeneration³, effectively operated as one unit. In the legislation establishing the agencies they were given a five-year term – my expectation was that they would be re-embedded in the local authority within this timeframe.

The remainder of this paper will review progress made (or not) under each of the main themes highlighted in the 2007 *Fitzgerald Report* and which were to become key objectives of the regeneration agencies.

Addressing Criminal Activity

It is generally acknowledged, and borne out by the official statistics, that the problem of serious

criminal activity on the estates has been significantly ameliorated in the intervening five years. Significant extra policing resources were assigned to the four areas and the Garda Síochána have worked very closely with the regeneration team, the City Council, and the communities to address the issues of serious criminality. The Garda Síochána adopted a different approach to policing, which involved a much greater level of partnership with the communities; a key aspect of which was that the accessibility and visibility of policing on the estates was transformed.

These combined efforts have dealt a serious blow to the criminal elements that had been dominating the communities. The implementation of comprehensive CCTV systems by the regeneration agencies throughout the four areas, the strengthened involvement of communities (including a greater confidence in reporting crime) and the provision of additional opportunities for sporting and leisure activities for young people has also been significant in achieving stability.

I noted in my 2007 report that dealing with serious criminality on the estates would not solve the problems in the long-term, but that in the short- and medium-term it was essential to fundamentally change the totally dysfunctional cycle of violence to allow other interventions an opportunity to take hold. I am satisfied that through the work of the Garda Síochána, the regeneration agencies and the various other state bodies that this has been achieved and can be maintained.

However, it is also the case that there still persists an unacceptable level of lower-level criminality and anti-social behaviour in some parts of the regeneration areas. This is very understandably of great concern to the local communities. This is difficult to police and also a problem that has to be addressed through the combined efforts of policing, community and estate management by the local authority. It points to the ongoing potential on the estates for problems to (re)arise. The risk is that, left unchecked, this could grow into a bigger problem, particularly as some of the young people involved grow older.

Social Change

One of the areas that was of most concern to me in 2007, but also one that I recognised as one of the most difficult to deal with, was the need to address the issue of social and educational disadvantage in the communities (see Figure 2). As noted above, these communities and the people living in them had been neglected for many decades.

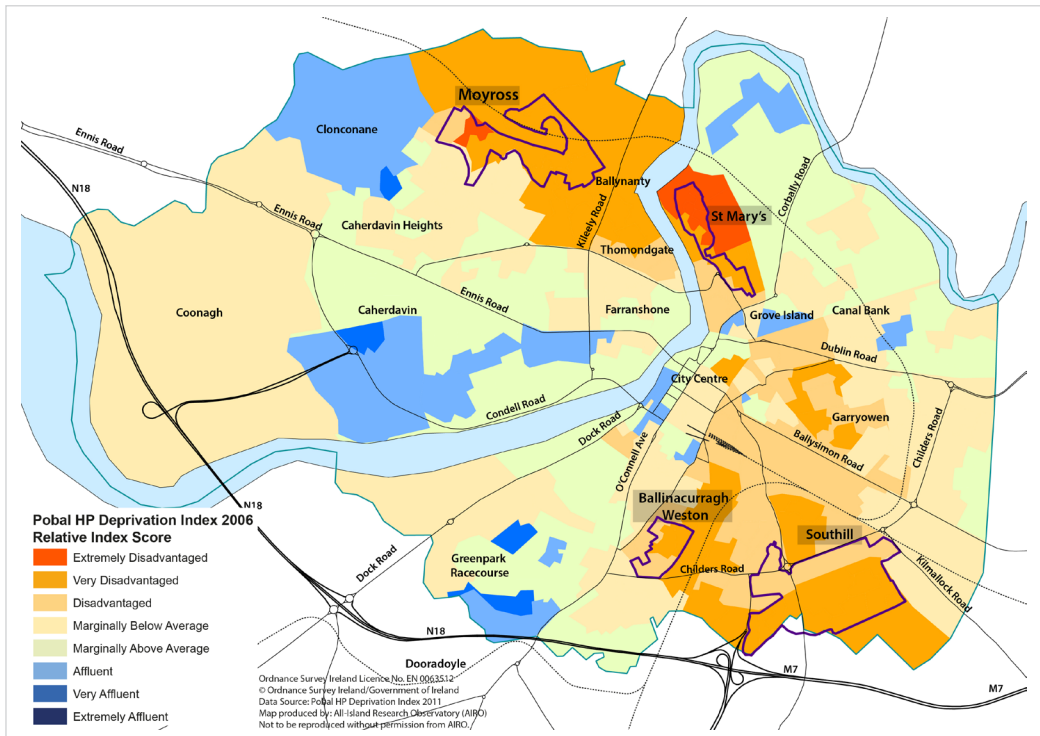
While I noted at the time that there were many Departments and agencies of State, as well as NGOs, active in these communities, and significant funding being put into various projects, there was a serious lack of cohesion and coordination of these efforts. One of the objectives of creating the regeneration agencies, with Boards representative of the key stakeholders – An Garda Síochána, FAS, Health Service Executive (HSE), Local Authorities of Limerick City, Limerick County and Clare County, PAUL Partnership, Limerick Enterprise Network, Moyross Community Centre to name but a few – was to provide for a greater degree of cohesion and focus on these issues.

The regeneration agencies, other Departments and agencies of State, have put a lot of work into these issues, although much of it is necessarily taking place in the background, and the results are not as visible as, for example, the results of physical build.

Some €16 million (i.e. over 50% of the budget allocated to the Limerick Regeneration Agencies over the five years) has been invested in a wide range of social and community related projects. These are generally quite small projects and have included family support services, community centres, community cafes, new sports facilities, new community creche and cultural and recreational resources.

There has also been investment in local educational programmes to keep 'at risk' children in school; early intervention programmes to help children with learning or emotional difficulties; and in parenting support services (see Figure 3). The benefits arising from these relatively small-scale projects

Figure 2: Relative Deprivation in the Regeneration Areas, 2006



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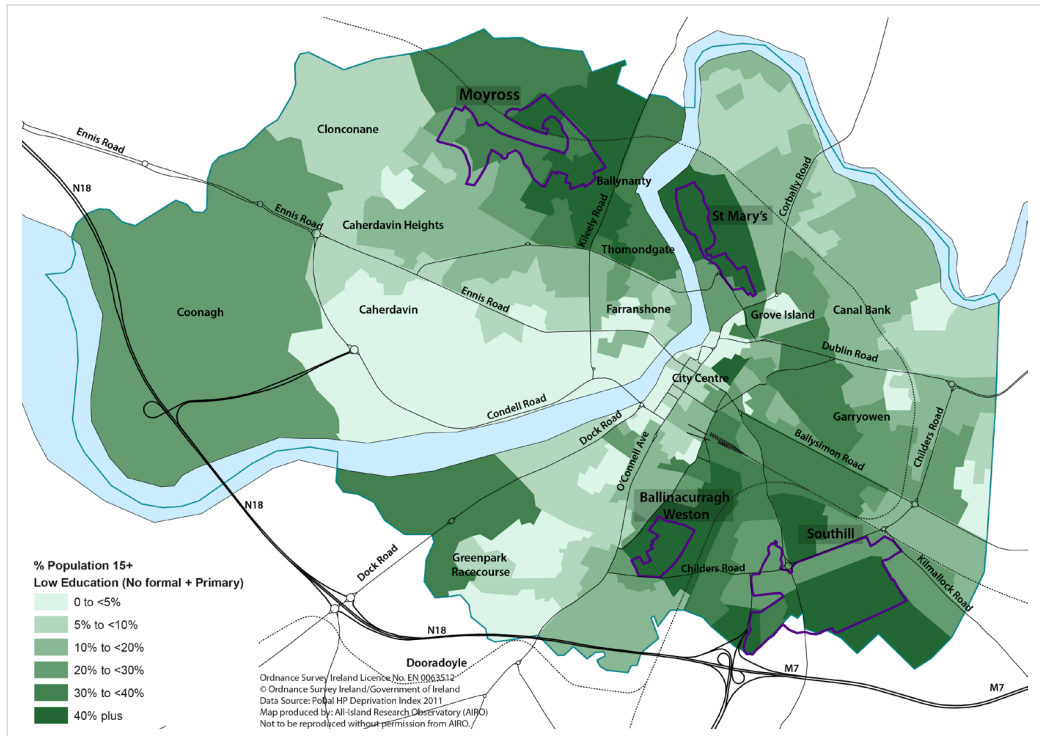
significantly outweigh the costs involved. On an issue that internationally has proved very difficult to deal with, the success of these social and educational interventions is encouraging. For example, the READ 2011 Literacy Project for Southill Local Committee, launched in January 2011, set the local schools in the area, as well as local residents and agency workers, the target of reading at least 2,011 books over a ten week period.

There are also a number of bigger social initiatives invested in by the regeneration agencies which will have long-term sustainable benefits for communities. These include: the Incredible Years Educational Programme, the Limerick Assessment of Needs Project, the Extern Support Project for Chaotic Children, the Southill and Weston Family Outreach Support Projects, and the St Kierans Educational Campus Proposal in Southill.

Much of the success that has been achieved to date has been on the basis of partnership working between the different Departments and agencies of State. There is no doubt that there has been a much greater level of cooperation and engagement between these different bodies than before, and a real willingness to make things work better in the education, health and social services sectors. This, in turn, has been reflected in the very practical engagement at Board level within the regeneration agencies with these issues. A range of non-statutory bodies have also been engaged to provide crucial and expert support in certain areas and this has worked well.

However, recent budget cuts have obviously hampered progress. It should also be recalled that the Limerick Regeneration Agencies have had a coordination remit which, from the outset, was

Figure 3: Percentage Population 15+ with Low Education (No Formal and Primary) in the Regeneration Areas, 2006



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their primary function. They did not have any direct statutory role in implementing most of the various initiatives developed.

It is increasingly clear, however, that the level of integrated and strategic focus achieved between the agencies, while better than before, has fallen short of the integrated dedicated teams to provide case management that I had envisaged in my 2007 report; teams which would have been multi-disciplinary thus allowing them to provide intensive family supports to address such issues as truancy, juvenile crime, and anti-social behaviour. Such teams would also have been responsible for providing activities and amenities for young people, particularly in the evenings and during the summer holidays – again as a means to address such issues as

juvenile crime and anti-social behaviour by providing alternatives.

This 'short-fall' is partly to do with the way programmes are funded on a silo-based approach, but also to do with the way Departments and agencies have been used to working for a very long time. These well-established ways of working are not going to change overnight, but there is no doubt that different approaches are required to address the diverse types of challenges that arise in these seriously disadvantaged areas.

Therefore, the aim should be still to develop these dedicated teams which not least would make better use of the now scarcer resources that are available, and provide a basis for 'scaling-up' the interventions that have already proved successful.

It is also absolutely critical that the progress made to date is accelerated and that momentum is not lost in any way. It is far too early in the process for these initiatives to be self-sustaining, and without active leadership there is a serious risk that old problems could begin to re-emerge.

Physical Regeneration and Infrastructure

There has been much focus in the media and elsewhere on this part of the process – perhaps understandably so, not least because the results of physical regeneration are immediately visible to everyone.

My 2007 report drew attention to the appalling living conditions on these estates, the generally poor quality of housing stock and the generally run-down appearance of these areas. However, housing is a complex issue in these areas; as we knew from the outset, housing was being used as a tool for controlling the areas by the criminal gangs.

The problem with planning for, or evaluating the results of, activity in physical regeneration is that, at least in the case of Limerick, this cannot be separated from the pace of progress in other areas. The housing problem is as much a manifestation of other problems, such as social and educational disadvantage and criminality, as it is the cause of them. Therefore, it was never possible, nor desirable, that houses could be purchased, knocked down, and rebuilt all within the five-year timeframe of the regeneration agencies. The original timeframe for the Masterplan, unveiled before the economic downturn, was, therefore, 2009–2018.

There clearly was a need to tackle social problems and criminality first, and then allow for some stability to be restored before starting a re-build programme. This process was further complicated by the unforeseeable economic downturn which, for example, effectively put paid to the aspiration to engage private investors as part of the plan to create a better public / private mix on the estates. There was also the need to develop a plan with the full

engagement of the community which is, inevitably, a time consuming, but still essential, process.

Originally, it was hoped that the exchequer allocation would be in the region of €75m per year for five years – the reality is that €116m was the total allocated over the whole period from 2007–2011. It should be noted that of this amount of budget allocation, over 75% of the total funding allocated (and, therefore, the main component of the spending), went directly to the Limerick local authorities and not to the regeneration agencies. The local authorities spent this money on purchasing back privately owned houses in the estates, purchasing houses in other parts of the city and county for relocation of residents, and for demolition. The regeneration agencies have generally not been part of that process.

The original objective of the Limerick Regeneration Agencies was to rebuild the communities in-situ, but it was generally accepted that a significant level of relocation would take place during the course of the regeneration process and that the ultimate size of the public housing estates, rented and purchased, would be smaller than what was there originally; leaving scope for the development of reasonably priced private housing.

Undoubtedly, the lack of a coordinated, coherent response nationally to the changing economic circumstances of the country – and the great deal of uncertainty that this has led to over the last five years – has not only hindered progress but also communication to residents, and led to some disappointment of expectations.

As a consequence of the very significant movement of residents over the last few years out of the estates, there is a perception that some parts of these estates have actually deteriorated. This is something that needs to be addressed by the newly integrated Regeneration Office within Limerick City Council⁴.



Addressing the poor quality of the housing stock, demolition work has begun

However, physical regeneration must be considered as part of a complex and longer-term process. So while physical regeneration has been somewhat slower than planned, it was never going to be realistic, or useful, to have a transformation of the estates within five years, given the complexity of the issues involved. In the coming months and years there will be much more visible signs of progress – rebuilding has already started – but that progress could not be achieved without the preparatory work that has taken place to date.

There has been some debate about whether the Masterplan for regeneration, produced in the first year by the regeneration agencies, was overly ambitious and unnecessarily raised expectations. Of course at one level this is true – had those involved in the production of the Masterplan foreseen the economic collapse that was about to materialise at a national level, the Masterplan would have been less ambitious. On the other hand, building costs are also lower now and, therefore, more can be achieved with less.

But at another level the Masterplan had to be ambitious. Part of the problem that led to my assignment by the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Social Exclusion in 2007 was the total lack of hope and ambition for these communities in the past. My view was, and is, that these communities are as deserving of future prospects based on high ambition as any

other group – and even more given the extent of past neglect. So the Masterplan set a high bar and a vision that remains valid and is achievable in the future, even if not now in the immediate future. This vision was never based purely on physical regeneration, although in some cases it was interpreted as such.

Significant further funds (approx €27m) were committed in 2012 and for the coming few years for regeneration. If maintained over 10 years, this funding will allow for the public elements of the housing regeneration to be completed. But a critical element of the Masterplan was the need to achieve a better public / private housing mix. While this may not be immediately attainable, it remains an objective that must be assiduously pursued, even while continuing with the public elements of the project and, in parallel, respecting and accepting the existence of long-standing communities.

Local infrastructure has been improved in other ways also; for example, the link road to Moyross from the Coonagh roundabout (Northern Distributer Route) will shortly commence. In addition, other small but significant environmental and community projects in the four regeneration areas have also been rolled out. These range from grounds management and clean-up in Southill – thus improving the look of the area and the community's pride in it – to the development of an all-weather pitch in St. Mary's Park to the opening of a community youth centre in Ballinacurra Weston.

Economic Regeneration

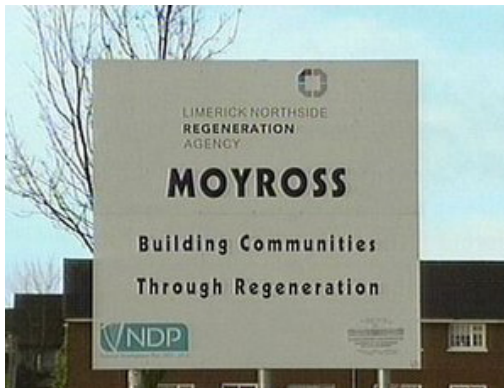
It is clear that economic regeneration in these areas at least partially depends on the policy instruments available, and some of the instruments that were initially envisaged, such as tax incentives, were not made available due to the requirements of EU and national legislation⁵.

Fundamentally, of course, the prospects of faster economic regeneration have also been stymied by the national budgetary crisis. However, it is a positive development that the economic development of

Limerick City as a whole will now be addressed in a focused way, and the economic development of the regeneration estates must be fully incorporated into those plans by the new unitary local authority⁶. The resolution of the boundary issue on the northside of the city, which was a serious impediment to progress in the past, has also been resolved – this entailed the extension of the City Boundary to the Clare County Boundary.

Communities

To return to the theme that I started with, I believe that one of the most significant developments has been the engagement of the local communities with the regeneration process. There is a level of frustration and impatience with the slow pace of progress, particularly on physical regeneration, but I have to contrast this with the apathy and lack of hope that I encountered back in 2007.



The Limerick Regeneration Agencies: Building Communities Through Regeneration

Together with the success in addressing serious criminality, the dynamic has fundamentally shifted; with the location of regeneration offices on the estates, the direct engagement of officials with the community, and the new community structures and processes that allow the people living on the estates to engage with the process of change, proper civic engagement has been restored. An engaged community is a demanding community.

However this, like other parts of the process, is still

fragile and existing capacity needs to be built upon in the coming years.

Next Stages

The Limerick regeneration programme has been a highly complex and challenging project (or set of many projects) for all involved. It has been the most significant regeneration programme ever attempted in the Irish State.

We cannot lose sight of the many significant steps forward that have been made in the past five years. As I said earlier, in my view the dynamic has fundamentally altered and where the balance of power previously lay with the criminal gangs and their associates, now it properly rests with the State and the local communities.

But in the context of a problem that has endured for many decades, five years is still a relatively short time. It is right that there be impatience to make faster progress; however, as I have also referred to many times above, the process is still very fragile. There is still a grave risk that, unless the momentum is maintained on all strands of regeneration, that progress made could be lost. Nobody wants a return to the situation that pertained pre-regeneration as described in the 2007 *Fitzgerald Report*. This means that there must be an unrelenting focus and energy, and resourcing to maintain momentum.

As previously noted, in advance of the new Unitary Local Authority being established in 2014, Limerick Regeneration – the name given to the unit replacing the Limerick Regeneration Agencies – has been embedded in Limerick City Council. It is critical that the new office maintains the engagement with the community that has been established by the regeneration agencies. It is fair to say that the communities were both supportive and grateful for the level of engagement by the Limerick Regeneration Agencies, but also naturally concerned about what will replace them. This new office must maintain a focus on all strands of regeneration, not just housing, and continue to engage all the stakeholders from Departments and State agencies.

The new office for regeneration will now be on a permanent footing, and will have authority for planning and implementation – but also the potential to take a more strategic view of how the various strands of intervention can be complementary and sustainable. The new manager appointed to the new single authority – including to oversee the transition phase – Mr. Conn Murray, will have a crucial role in providing leadership for regeneration in the years ahead. Until Limerick Regeneration is fully embedded within local government – and fully operational – this is a crucial period that must be managed carefully by the Department, the local authorities and the communities. There must be no sense of drift since that can only give comfort to those elements who may wish to see a return to the past.

Overall, a very significant change has happened as a result of all of the agencies and Departments involved, but not least the Limerick Regeneration Agencies themselves, whose Board and staff have shown extraordinary dedication to the process over the past five years. But the bottom line is that unless the momentum so far achieved to regenerate these estates is maintained, and until fragility is supplanted by stability and growth, there is no room for complacency. If there is any such complacency or loss of momentum, then inevitably the situation will deteriorate to what it was in 2006 or even worse, with the consequential intolerable cost to the lives of those who reside in and around these communities, and to the region as a whole.

Endnotes

¹ Six-year-old Millie and her four-year-old brother Gavin Murray were sitting in their mother's car when it was doused with petrol and set alight. The attack took place because their mother had refused to give someone a lift to the courthouse 10 minutes earlier.

² The unemployment rate in Moyross and Southhill was five times the national average in 2007.

³ Limerick Regeneration North covers Moyross and St. Mary's Park while Limerick Regeneration South covers Southhill and Ballinacurra Weston.

⁴ Limerick Regeneration is now under the responsibility of Limerick City Council following the end of the five-year term of office of the Limerick Regeneration Agencies.



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⁵ It was originally proposed in the *Fitzgerald Report* that fiscal incentives to attract private investors be made available under the Regional Aid Guidelines 2007-2013.

⁶ In 2014, Limerick City Council and Limerick County Council will come together to form a single Unitary Authority.