



## John Higgins takes over at Retirement Planning Council

BY JILL KERBY

***If anyone exemplifies the Retirement Planning Council of Ireland's motto, "Because Life Changes", it is John Higgins, the Council's new chief executive who recently replaced outgoing CEO Hillary Shannon.***

Higgins has a working life full of change and challenge on his CV, from teacher-principal of the national school in Loughglynn to supermarket owner to County Development Officer in Kiltimagh, Co Mayo. From there he was recruited by the Catholic western bishops to head the Western Development Partnership Board – a job he developed so successful that it became a blueprint for many such other regional development boards. Finally, last February, he left behind 10 years as the General Secretary of the Progressive Democrats.

Born in Ballyhaunis, Co Mayo – his brother is Fine Gael MEP Jim Higgins – he admits that politics has been in his blood for a long time – but he's also relishing this new job, dealing with other people who are also facing great change: retirement.

On the late Friday afternoon in April when Irish Pensions arrived at the RPCI's second floor office on Dublin's Pembroke Street, the offices and seminar rooms were packed with facilitators and their clients, many with their spouses, finishing off their day-long courses. The same scene also takes place most days in venues in Cork and Galway Limerick, Waterford,

Kilkenny and Dundalk.

"We provide four different courses – first here in Dublin for single people, company groups and couples, next, company courses where we go to them,

of it to the last minute, which is why the RPC is so keen to promote the mid-career courses, with clients booking in often up to 10 years before they're ready to leave work.

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then the mid-career courses, which are held around the country and increasingly popular and one-to-one courses, usually with CEOs."

All the courses cover, in different ways and emphasis, the key retirement issues of money, relationships, health and 'time'. The latter is in recognition, says John "that people will have a lot more of it" after they leave their jobs and careers.

Retirement, he says, comes as a great shock to those who leave the planning

"If they come just before they retire," says John, "many people find that it is too late to make big changes to their habits or lifestyle, something that is far more likely if there is sufficient time to do some planning. The mid-career course, he says, opens their eyes to the financial and leisure issues that it is "so crucial to get right". In recent years, as more and more studies, like the TCD Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) has shown how much longer we are all living, the RPC has developed course material that helps and encourages clients "to consider keeping

working after retirement. An active retirement has been shown to keep you alive – and healthier too.”

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“We are seeing more and more people who have changed jobs or had interrupted service,” he explains, “and they may have to rely upon their investments as well as their pensions for their retirement income.” The dramatically changing nature of pension products and the falling ratio of workers to pensioners in the future (for the State pension benefit) means they need to be aware, earlier than later, of how well or badly their pension is performing.

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#### POLICY WORK

On the policy side, there are plenty of issues to keep the new CEO busy and enthusiastic – a throwback to the years of policy positioning and wrangling that was so central to his job with the PDs.



On the occupational side, he says the issues include work sharing and the current retirement age: “So many people are frightened of having no work to do just because they’ve turned 65.”

There are plenty of issues, like the retirement age, that need tackling on the state pension side too he says. “Such as the way the state pays benefits to non-contributors vs contributors; the rules regarding the adult dependent’s allowance; how the ‘stamp’ is calculated, which desperately needs to be simplified” and, how the Pensions Board is promoting the need for everyone to save more.

He’s also keen to find new funding for companies who currently don’t have the resources to send their employees to the RPC for courses – small tradesmen and shopkeepers, hoteliers, publicans, farmers who are all employers.

One solution, he says, is for the Council itself to train more tutors at the local level and then to act as the guarantor of quality for the courses. “As a charitable trust I believe we’re ideally placed to provide this service.” As someone with huge local and national development and policy-making experience, John Higgins may be just the man to make it possible.

### At a Glance...

Founded over 30 years ago, the Retirement Planning Council of Ireland, a charitable foundation, is supported by 300 private and semi-state companies and is funded from course fees, membership subscriptions plus sponsorship and grants. It is not funded by central government.

The voluntary Board of the RPC is represented by directors, some working, some retired who are eminent in their fields and represent a wide range of industries and professions include the likes of retired chartered accountant and barrister **John Donnelly**, former Managing Partner of Deloitte Haskins & Sells and Chairman of Deloitte & Touche; **Anne Maher**, the former CEO of the Pensions Board; **Tom Molloy**, a former Chairman of the RPC who is Managing Director of Irish Pensions Trust; **Marie Fingleton**, Human Resource Specialist at the Institute of Public Administration; **Michael O’Halloran**, CEO of the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament; **Martin Walsh**, retired Head of Lending at the EBS

Many active members of the IAPF Council and committees have been directors of the Board, including two current RPC directors, **Tony Gargan**, Group Welfare Manager at AIB and **Fiona Thornton**, Solicitor, LK Shiels. The current Chairman is **Bill Barry**, HR Consultant and the former head of Human Resources at Teagasc.