

Green Paper on Local Government

Stronger Local Democracy Options for Change

Summary



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The environment in which local government in Ireland operates has greatly altered in the past 20 years. Local government has played a key role in shaping and facilitating change over this time through the provision of infrastructure, new services and the operation of the planning system. The structural improvements to the local government administrative system under *Better Local Government* (1996) have strengthened the sector's capacity to represent local communities, to shape local policy and to deliver a wider range of services. However, the major changes which have occurred in Ireland in recent years have confronted local government with a new set of challenges.

The Challenge Ahead

Local government is tasked with serving a larger, more diverse, more educated and more demanding population. In addition to providing traditional 'hard' services, such as housing, roads and water etc, local authorities must now give more time to the more complex 'softer' tasks of community building. Coordinating development and providing essential services, particularly in areas of significant population growth, will remain a demanding task.


Local government also faces onerous environmental management tasks in dealing with waste, protecting water quality and addressing the challenges of climate change.

Coping with these challenges requires innovation and high performance.

Despite the Irish people's strong identity with place, including the connection to their county, the complexities and pressures of everyday life are militating against meaningful opportunities for civic participation and weakening the connection between citizens and their institutions of local democracy.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to reform local government to make it more transparent and more responsive to its customers. *Stronger Local Government – Options for Change* represents the first response to that commitment. It presents an opportunity to reshape local government so that it is fit for purpose for the challenges ahead.

The consideration of the future of local government in Ireland has been informed by several guiding principles:

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- Appreciation of the importance of local democratic institutions;
 - Decision-making at the lowest appropriate level (subsidiarity);
 - Democratic responsibility and accountability;
 - Proper balance between the number and functions of local government structures and the requirements of coherence, value for money and efficient delivery of service; and,
 - Continued focus on Quality Customer Service.

The discussion on local government is also grounded in the recognition that, if local government is to flourish and excel, central government must demonstrate a greater appreciation of the value of local priority setting. It must also trust local authorities to deliver new services, building on local government's role in representing the democratic expression of local communities. For this to happen local government needs to be strengthened from within to give stronger expression to local political leadership and greater local democratic accountability.

The Consultation Process

The purpose of *Stronger Local Democracy – Options for Change* is not to arrive at a single solution, but to present options for further consideration and debate. The Paper was prepared following consideration of an initial round of public consultation and consideration of the issues by a Consultative Committee appointed by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

Copies of submissions received and details of the Committee's discussions can be found at www.environ.ie.

Towards Stronger Local Democracy

The central theme of *Stronger Local Government – Options for Change* is that local government can deliver more if equipped to do so. It suggests that the sector can be strengthened by providing a greater role for local, democratic and responsible leadership. This poses a challenge to a number of interests, including central government. It also provides an opportunity to create a more dynamic and less dependent local government system. The key proposals in the Paper are as follows:

A Mayor for the Dublin Region

Dublin, as a highly successful urban centre, faces a number of strategic challenges in areas including planning, transport, housing, waste, water provision and waste water disposal. It is therefore proposed that a Regional Mayor for Dublin with defined strategic functions should be introduced. The role of the Mayor in relation to current and future institutional arrangements needs careful consideration, particularly in regard to the 4 Dublin local authorities, the adjoining local authorities, and

national offices. It is proposed, for example, that the Dublin Mayor should become the Chair of the proposed Dublin Transport Authority. Detailed consideration will need to be given to the administrative and institutional supports necessary for the proper functioning of a mayoral office in Dublin.

Directly Elected Mayors in other Cities and Counties

The Paper considers that greater local leadership, accountability and connection with the citizen can be achieved through the provision of directly elected mayors for all counties and cities. As a complementary measure, the chairs of each local authority's Strategic Policy Committees should be elected for the full term of the council.

The managerial system has served Irish local government well and local authorities will continue to rely on professional managers to provide impartial, professional administration and guidance. It is suggested, however, that mayors might be assigned certain key powers of initiative and that, over time, their role in overseeing the work of the local authorities, local development agencies and national agencies at local level should evolve further.

Greater Devolution of Decision Making to Town Councils

In examining town government, the Paper examines the principles of efficient service provision and the democratic legitimacy provided by town councils. The establishment of new town councils would need careful consideration having regard to the potential impact on resources and efficient service delivery. In terms of functions, measures such as the empowerment of existing town councils through devolved decision making and the negotiated transfer of functions from county to town level are proposed for examination. Measures such as participatory budgeting, binding local plebiscites and town meetings could also be developed to foster direct, meaningful contact between councils and the citizen.

Improved Customer Service

The culture of continuous change is stressed, as is the need for local government flexibility and imagination in service delivery. Greater movement towards the sharing of services is advocated. Local authorities have many achievements which should be better showcased. Elected mayors will be important in raising the profile of achievement.

Possible New Political Structures in Other Key Gateways

The establishment of a mayoral office in Dublin, with a regional remit, suggests that consideration should be given to revised structures for local governance in other key Gateways, such as Limerick, Waterford and Sligo, to overcome fragmentation of local authority responsibilities while respecting county boundaries.



Need for Greater Local Decision Making

A relationship of trust between central and local government is advocated, in which central government can, in time, transfer appropriate functions and responsibilities to local control. *Stronger Local Democracy – Options for Change* also suggests that the local government sector could work more effectively in a collective way to further the aims of strong local government. Also addressed are issues such as local authority boundaries, the Local Government Commission and the numbers of councillors.

Local Government Financing

The need for proper funding of local government is recognised. Autonomy in fund raising increases local discretion and accountability. However, there is little consensus on how best to achieve such autonomy. This is an issue which will receive in depth analysis in the context of the recently established Commission on Taxation, which is to consider the issue of local government financing.

An Improved Ethics Regime

Stronger Local Democracy – Options for Change also suggests the need for greater cohesion between local government law and general ethics legislation. A clearer oversight role for the Standards in Public Office Commission is proposed. It is recommended that local electoral expenditure limits should be introduced but that the bureaucracy involved in any new procedures should be kept to a minimum.

Next Steps

The Green Paper is available on the Department's website (www.environ.ie) in a number of formats.

Stronger Local Democracy - Options for Change is intended as a discussion document, to generate a wide debate on the future of local government. Your views will be very welcome to help inform the drafting of the White Paper, which will set out the options chosen by Government for change. Please log on to the Department's website to give us the benefit of your opinions.