

Ireland's taskforce on local democracy

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Introduction

Top-down reform of local government has long been a feature of successive efforts to change how local government functions in Ireland (Callanan, 2018). Predating the formation of the state, the local government sector has limited capacity to act independently and is now recognised to be among the least autonomous systems within the jurisdiction of the Council of Europe (European Commission, 2021). That acknowledged, it is often argued that the system in Ireland is heavily centralised, which in some respects is not fully the case. Even in the above local autonomy report, Ireland is recognised as having a local government system where there is some discretion in regard to local planning and local finance. Irish councils are also relatively free to develop policies in areas that would underpin the socio-economic potential of their communities. Such areas include, for example, tourism, addressing social disadvantage and ageing, arts, culture and recreation. In that context the state might be more ideally described as

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having a highly disaggregated local and national public management system, both interdependent and often having to work around institutional barriers which are increasingly seen as getting in the way of both national and local policy delivery.

A further key feature underpinning local government in Ireland is that it is clearly provided for within the context of the Irish Constitution, European and national jurisprudence, the common law and the national to local legislative framework, most notably the Local Government Act 2001, as amended. Consequently, the local government sector is the only local manifestation of local democracy. Furthermore, it could be argued that the *raison d'être* of the local government system is, as is the case across the Council of Europe area, that of being the only manifestation of local democratic accountability, something which has been highlighted over recent years by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE, 2023).

Origins of local government in Ireland

The Government of Ireland finds its origins in the establishment of Dáil Éireann in 1919 at the start of Ireland's War of Independence. As a consequence, it is one of Europe's oldest continuous parliamentary expressions of democracy. But democracy, of a local kind, can trace its origins in Ireland to the establishment of a local government system following, primarily, the Local Government Act of 1898. A key part of the effort to restrict progress towards Home Rule in Ireland, the effect of putting in place local democratically elected councils unsurprisingly motivated the urge for an independent Ireland. Local democracy in Ireland has therefore pre-existed democracy at national level by over two decades.

The local government system, during the Irish Wars 1916–1923, played a critical role in shifting loyalty from the then rule of the British Empire towards an Irish National Parliament that sat initially in the Mansion House in Dublin, courtesy of Dublin Corporation, the then council of the city which itself even predates by several centuries the existence of the local government system rolled out across Ireland under the 1898 reforms.

Despite its important role in achieving independence, or maybe because of it, local democracy has not fared well in Ireland. Following independence, the then young government set about establishing its rule of law by making sure the local government system fell in line with

the new parliament in Dublin. Through the introduction of the Local Government Act 1925 and subsequent initiatives, arguably the most notable being the introduction of county and city management, the impact of local elected members became severely restricted. The effect was to create a much-constrained system, in democratic terms, over the succeeding decades; what may more accurately be defined as a system of local administration rather than local government.

The councils are organised along two key pillars. The first, the elected body, is largely responsible for policy adoption. The second pillar, the executive (including the recently established Mayor of Limerick), is generally regarded as the strongest feature of the system with Chief Executives and the Limerick Mayor seen as the principal leaders at local council level. The Chief Executive role (but not the mayoral role in Limerick, which is Ireland's only directly elected executive position) and all other executive-level positions are filled through open competition via a central appointments body, the Public Appointments Service.

Currently, Ireland has thirty-one local authorities and their share of total exchequer expenditure, including in respect of capital projects is about 12–14 per cent. While many of its functions are similar to those found in other parts of Europe, there are some critical differences. The Irish version, for example, does not have a direct mandate in education with primary to secondary education, a key local responsibility across local government in the rest of Europe, largely delivered under individual boards of management which look to the national Department of Education for support and direction.

Anything that is not policy is the responsibility of the Chief Executive. The one exception to these arrangements, as noted above, is recent and applies to the City and County of Limerick where a directly elected executive mayor has effectively taken over much of the responsibilities of the Chief Executive role found in the other councils since the local elections of 2024. The election of such a role may (or may not) be a precursor to future reforms in Ireland.

At the European level, Ireland has long subscribed to the principles of the Council of Europe's Charter of Local Self-Government. The Charter was signed by Ireland on 7 October 1997 and signed into ratification on 14 May 2002. It came into force in Ireland on 1 September 2002. However, a lot remains to be done to genuinely reflect the provisions of the European Charter on Local Self Government and its application in Ireland. Successive reviews by CLRAE (2023), which operates under the umbrella of the Council of

Europe, have been very critical of how local government in Ireland is organised with many non-compliance findings against Ireland in the past decade.

Rebuilding local democracy

Dissatisfaction with the current system of local government, particularly in regard to the role of local democracy, has become a feature of public discourse in the past decade. While local councils have sought to develop their role in economic and community development, much of their best practice is not politically or indeed publicly acknowledged. There is a widely perceived imbalance between local and national government, alongside the internal imbalance between the elected member's role and that of the executive. Pressure has built up through a combination of the compliance reports of the CLRAE, a report on local democracy prepared by Ireland's upper parliamentary house, Seanad Éireann (Seanad Public Consultation Committee, 2024), and arguably most significantly, the Association of Irish Local Government (2024) general election manifesto, which focused on the need to develop understanding of the importance of local democracy across the state. The state itself under an earlier government also acknowledged the importance of local democracy with the publication of the *Independent Review of the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members* prepared by Ms Sara Moorhead, SC, in 2020 (Moorhead, 2020).

On the vast majority of metrics used by the CLRAE and the European Commission, Ireland can be viewed as a laggard. Poor overall levels of representation, low levels of councillor responsibilities, limited autonomy, along with over-reliance on bespoke funding programmes thanks to over 700 individual funding programmes (Muldoon-Smith et al., 2025). Spending, nonetheless, has increased markedly in recent years thanks to both a growing own-income base along with increasing revenue and capital funding from government (Government of Ireland, 2025a).

These concerns have featured in analysis of the local government sector for several decades, most notably the publication of the comprehensive reform proposals of the Barrington Report in 1991 (Barrington, 1991) and the Devolution Commission in 1997 (Oireachtas Debates, 1996) which was supplanted by the publication of *Better Local Government* in 1996 (Government of Ireland, 1996).

These reforms were implemented through the adoption of the Local Government Act 2001 and were significantly updated with the publication of *Putting People First* in 2012 (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012), at a time of severe economic distress in the country. *Putting People First* brought through fundamental structural reforms with the abolition of town councils, the establishment of municipal districts, the establishment of the National Oversight and Audit Commission and the three regional assemblies. The abolition of town councils was a particularly significant development, resulting in a reduction in local representation from 1,628 councillors to 949 elected members across the thirty-one local authorities and the municipal districts. No direct statutory provision was made for area committees then in place in Greater Dublin and Cork City, and these remain without formal statutory provision at national level.

A new programme for local government

The *Programme for Government* (Government of Ireland, 2025b), which underpins the national policy environment, was agreed by the current government at the start of 2025. It sets out a comprehensive series of actions that will provide the basis for public policy development and implementation over the next five or so years in Ireland. The programme provides over 2,400 different actions across all aspects of public policy with some 640 directly or indirectly impacting local government. A key feature of the programme is the focus on political reform which has a drive towards protecting democracy and, in particular, strengthening local democracy. Consequently, a Local Democracy Taskforce (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2025) is a central action of the new Programme and this Task Force has now been put in place.

The taskforce has been charged with bringing forward proposals which the government will consider, with a particular focus on:

1. The principle of subsidiarity.
2. Increasing the range of reserved functions and consideration of devolving more powers to local authorities for local services.
3. Granting councillors greater input and control over the development and implementation of the local authority budget.
4. Rebalancing power between elected councillors and the executive to ensure that elected officials have a right to be consulted on a

greater range of decisions and the right to know of all other decisions in a timely manner.

5. Increasing the accountability of the Chief Executive and Directors of Services to councillors for executive decisions.
6. Enhancing fiscal autonomy.
7. The timely reporting of the National Oversight and Audit Commission and engagement with public representatives.
8. The proportion of local authority members to population.
9. Strengthening the framework and powers of municipal districts and area committees.
10. Support frameworks for councillors to carry out their duties drawing from the Moorhead report (2020).
11. On a regional, phased basis, establish town councils in large towns to provide a focal point for raising concerns of towns and coordinating town-focused activities.

As noted earlier, key inputs to the framing of the taskforce brief comes from the following reports:

- the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe's *Monitoring of the Application of the European Charter of Local Self Government* (October 2023)
- the Association of Irish Local Government's *The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government* (December 2023)
- the Seanad Public Consultation Committee's *Report on the Future of Local Democracy* (October 2024)
- the Association of Irish Local Government's *Building Stronger Local Government General Election Manifesto* (November 2024).

This work got underway during autumn 2025 and is due to report in spring 2026. Members of the taskforce are drawn from both the elected and executive branches of local government, various government officials and independent academic contributors. It is chaired by an independent Chairman, former Secretary General at the Department of Health, Mr Jim Breslin. A stakeholder consultation exercise has recently concluded and submissions received are now publicly available. Papers prepared to date for the taskforce to consider have also been published.

The taskforce has adopted its final terms of reference and at its first meeting it agreed the following six guiding principles:

- openness
- fairness
- efficiency
- implementation
- effectiveness
- representation.

Following agreement by the government in June 2025, the lead, central department, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, identified a programme of work, organised into four key pillars listed below (councillors' powers will be considered under each pillar):

- structure
- finance/funding
- functions
- governance/accountability.

Each pillar group began its work in autumn 2025 by preparing a paper on the current issues applicable to each of the pillar areas. They will then prepare initial issues and options papers, followed by drafting final specific recommendations, which are expected to form part of the taskforce's final report and recommendations to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It is expected that the taskforce will publish its findings in February 2026 and these will then be examined by an Oireachtas (parliament) Committee. This could result in a possible white paper next summer followed by a challenging and rigorous legislative process so that reforms arising from the taskforce report could conceivably be in place before the next local government elections in 2029.

Some thoughts

With the work ongoing there has been some suggestion that the establishment of a local democracy taskforce might well be 'another talking shop'. However, it is evident from the work of the Association of Irish Local Government and the international Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe that the pressure being mounted on the government may be having an impact. It also has to be acknowledged that no previous programme for government has

recognised the importance of local democracy as clearly as is set out in the 2025 programme.

This does suggest that there is now an opportunity to fully debate the future role of local government and local democracy, arguably for the first time in the history of the state. Some of the areas to be considered will be challenging. Is there a need to return to town government if municipal districts are to be strengthened? Equally, how can discussions around municipal government be avoided given the extraordinary pace of growth of the population in Ireland's towns? Scenario reporting by the Department of Finance (2025) suggests that Ireland's population could reach up to 8 million people within the career life of a young public servant starting their career in 2025. Does this suggest that there is a need for new city governments being put in place over the coming four decades, and if so where is the future for local and regional government in the Republic? What of the possible impact of an all-of-island constitutional reconfiguration? In the event of, it seems, an increasingly likely border poll in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, is there not a case for examining possible federal to local arrangements such as are found in other CLRAE jurisdictions? Is the taskforce therefore two decades late by trying to address the legacies of a century of disaggregated governance in the Republic of Ireland?

Understanding the nature of the local-to-national policy balance in Ireland will be a major challenge if there is to be a gradual migration towards those models found generally across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Nonetheless, the establishment of the taskforce has to be acknowledged as a major move forward. This is something that those interested in the ongoing vibrancy of the local government sector in Ireland might not have expected given the history of local government in the country. Therefore, the outcomes of the taskforce's deliberations should be awaited with considerable anticipation.

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