

Strategic policy committees: Utilising data and evidence to inform policy development in local government

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between central and local government in Ireland and how this dynamic shapes service delivery along with policy development and implementation opportunities at the local level. It explores the original intent behind strategic policy committees (SPCs), introduced under the Better Local Government reform programme, which sought to strengthen local democracy and enhance the policy role of elected members through structured engagement with sectoral stakeholders. While SPCs were designed as key instruments for collaborative policy development, the paper highlights ongoing challenges in realising their full policy remit, including ambiguity around their scope, capacity constraints, and the continued influence of central government.

The paper further analyses a case study from Dublin City Council, where an SPC-led initiative examined the potential remunicipalisation of domestic waste collection. Through the commissioning of independent research and the evaluation of multiple policy scenarios, this case study demonstrates how SPCs can contribute to evidence-informed policy development.

Drawing on this example, the paper identifies lessons for other local authorities, emphasising the importance of research capacity, collaboration between elected members, sectoral groups and officials, while adhering to structured policy development frameworks. It concludes that, despite systemic constraints, SPCs continue to be an important vehicle for local policy leadership and innovation.

Keywords: central government, evidence-informed, local government, policy development, strategic policy committees.

Introduction

This paper will explore the relationship between central and local government and how these interactions have shaped service delivery along with policy development and implementation at the local level. It will consider the original intent and ambition behind strategic policy committees (SPCs) along with the challenges of realising their policy remit, and will examine a case study of an SPC in Dublin City Council proposing a policy change on the remunicipalisation of domestic waste in Dublin City. The case study is also framed using the lens of the policy framework agreed by the Civil Service Management Board. The paper will then reflect on the lessons other local authorities could learn by taking an evidenced-informed approach to policy development in their own administrative areas. Such consideration of the role of SPCs is timely given the most recent local government reform programme, namely the Local Democracy Taskforce, launched in July 2026, which highlights the continued importance of SPCs to the policy-making process at local level (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2026).

Services provided by local government

The role of local authorities in Ireland can at times be misjudged and misunderstood by the public they serve. In fact, local authorities deliver more than 1,100 services that many people take for granted. A good indication of the type of activities local authorities are concerned with is reflected in the eight service divisions which explain their function and role. The Public Bodies (Amendment) Order, 1975, provided for the classification of local authority functions into eight programme groups (renamed in 2009 as service divisions), which have more or less remained the same with some minor amendments until the present day and form the basis of annual budgets for local authorities and are as follows:

1. Housing and Building
2. Road Transportation and Safety
3. Water Services
4. Development Management
5. Environmental Services
6. Recreation and Amenity

7. Agriculture, Food and the Marine
8. Miscellaneous Services

Across these eight service divisions, local authorities provide a wide range of social, economic, environmental and community related services, including providing and managing social homes; providing homeless services; maintaining local and regional roads; building and maintaining bridges and public lighting; operating recycling centres; providing fire prevention services; developing and implementing local climate action plans; managing the national network of public libraries; supporting local festivals; managing local planning applications along with the development of city and county development plans; collecting commercial rates; updating the register of electors; as well as maintaining local public parks. The foregoing is only a tiny fraction of the services provided on a daily basis.¹

Relationship between central and local government

Notwithstanding the breadth of such service provision, some of which are carried out on an agency basis on behalf of central government, Callanan remarks that ‘local authorities in Ireland operate within the framework of national policy’ (Callanan, 2018). In the same vein, Phelan notes that local government is ‘primarily a policy taker from central government’ (Phelan, 2021). Compared to other European counterparts, local government in Ireland tends to be an outlier with limited opportunity for autonomy and the ability to act independently although Ó Riordáin notes there is ‘some discretion in regard to local planning and local finance’ (Ó Riordáin, 2025). The European Commission’s self-rule index (European Commission, 2021) has consistently highlighted a significant local government deficit in Ireland, firmly establishing the country as one of the most highly centralised nations in the European Union. This opinion was further supported by the Council of Europe which commented that ‘although Ireland is a solid democracy, it remains one of the most centralised countries in Europe’ and there was still a lot to be done ‘before local self-government in Ireland is on par with other European countries’ (Council of Europe, 2023). The lack of administrative autonomy is compounded by a pronounced fiscal mismatch that leaves Irish local

¹ A full catalogue of services is available here: <https://services.localgov.ie/en-ie/Home/intro>

authorities financially hamstrung and overly reliant on central government funding. Indeed, public spending at the Irish local level sits at around just 7 per cent, a stark contrast to the European Union average of over 23 per cent. This means that local authorities have little or no room to ‘adapt spending to local needs, even when they are responsible for delivering services’ (Prorok & Calzol, 2025). This relative lack of independence dates back to the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898, which Forde notes ‘established the county as the principal administrative unit and the elected county council as the means of administering local government’ (Forde, 2005). The system was retained following independence and the contraction of powers continued with further centralisation taking place. This trend persisted throughout the twentieth century with health and education functions transferring away from local government in the 1970s, national roads in the 1990s and again more recently with water supply and wastewater treatment transferring to Uisce Éireann in 2014.

Reform era and the emergence of strategic policy committees

Despite repeated calls for the decentralisation or devolution of some central government functions, very little change occurred. *Report of the Advisory Expert Committee on Local Government Reorganisation and Reform*, better known as the *Barrington Report*, published in 1991 commented that if local government was ‘to develop, rather than be neglected mainly to the provision of a narrow range of utility and regulatory services, all public services that can be administered locally, should, as far as possible, be considered as candidates for devolution and this challenge will have to be faced up to’ (Barrington, 1991). While recommendations from the report were not acted on for the most part, the appetite for change and reform was growing and in 1996, a white paper, which later became known as *Better Local Government: A Programme for Change* emerged (Department of the Environment, 1996). This programme was based around four key pillars:

- Enhancing local democracy;
- Serving the customer better;
- Developing efficiency;
- Providing proper resources.

The concept of SPCs emerged from the first pillar. There was a belief at national level that as elected members with a democratic mandate, councillors were not fulfilling their role as policymakers (i.e. their reserved functions) effectively. It was felt that the local government executive was fulfilling this role and according to the *Better Local Government* paper, 'policy was the product of local administration rather than local democracy'. While committee structures already existed across the sector, the programme stated that 'in only a very few cases can the local government committee structures be seen to represent a coherent framework for the discharge of business' (Department of Environment, 1996). Such structures which had evolved over time, generally in an unplanned manner, therefore required a 'radical overhaul' in order to develop the policy role of councillors. It recommended the establishment of SPCs mirroring the functions of each local authority and tailored based on size with each committee being able to 'identify particular policy areas for special consideration, arrange for their in-depth examination and report on necessary changes' (Department of Environment, 1996). SPCs would be made up of elected representatives and non-elected representatives. Mirroring the partnership model, which began in Ireland in the late 1980s and in order to 'foster a higher degree of community relevance and local participation', SPCs would also draw on the expertise of relevant sectors (Department of Environment, 1996). The non-elected representatives would come from the following sectoral interest groups:

- agriculture/farming sector;
- environmental sector;
- business/commercial sector;
- development construction sector;
- trade union sector;
- social inclusion sector;
- community and voluntary sector.

Having representatives from the above areas bringing their sectoral expertise to SPC meetings would enhance democratic policy-making at the local level. Therefore, the SPC structure would be used to advise and support the full council (which is the ultimate decision-making

body) in the development, implementation and review of local policies. In addition, a corporate policy group, comprising the chairpersons of each SPC (who have to be elected by committee members), would have a key role and 'act as a sort of cabinet' to provide a forum where policy issues could be progressed (Department of Environment, 1996).

Under *Better Local Government*, an important new structure had now emerged with a significant local policy intent. Section 48 of the Local Government Act, 2001, formalised the role of SPCs in considering 'matters connected with the formulation, development, monitoring and review of policy' relating to the function of a council. The establishment of SPCs began in earnest in some local authorities in 1998 and had become fully operational from mid-2001 onwards.

Strategic policy committee consolidation and associated challenges

The intervening period has seen a somewhat mixed response regarding the original policy intent of SPCs. During the early days of SPCs, there was some disquiet at central level as to how impactful they were and in 2004 the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government commissioned the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) to carry out a national review of the effectiveness of SPCs and identify areas for improvement. Contributors to the review stated that instructions emanating from central government can be so prescriptive that there is often little discretion for local implementation (IPA, 2004). Although this sentiment may not have been surprising given the central-local relationship outlined above, the review noted that while some contributors had begun their participation on SPCs with a negative impression, they changed their view as practice improved and SPCs became more embedded meaning that they 'began to see the results of their deliberations and decisions'. The review made a series of recommendations in relation to the practicalities of SPC meetings, including procedures, policy support and development as well as training. Following its publication (IPA, 2004), new departmental guidelines were issued to local authorities following the local elections in 2004 (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2004).

In 2012, a new reform paper, *Putting People First: Action Programme for Effective Local Government* (Department of the Environment,

Community and Local Government, 2012) was published which sought to devolve power to the local level to make the local government system more citizen-led, democratically accountable and operationally efficient. It also created the requirement for each local authority to establish an SPC specifically focused on economic development and enterprise. This was noteworthy given the broader parameters within which local government operated as it provided for a degree of autonomy in driving local growth and job creation. *Putting People First* noted that SPCs had ‘achieved a measure of success in providing a focus for elected members to input into policy formation, but this needs to be reinforced in order that the role of the Cathaoirleach and members, as leaders of their authority and the local community, can be better delivered’ (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012, pp. 134–5). As part of this programme, it committed to reviewing and strengthening SPC structures in order to enhance their effectiveness. This commitment was followed by the circulation of updated guidelines in 2014 (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2014).

In the context of this paper, the guidelines stated that that local authorities should develop ‘as practicable as possible the policy support role for SPCs’. In particular, it noted that directors of service should ‘undertake appropriate research on relevant policy options when SPC members are formulating policy’ and make greater use of the research capacity within local authorities and external agencies such as the Local Government Management Agency and third level institutions. Examples of how the Local Government Management Agency has supported the local government sector and its representative group, the County and City Management Association, to increase their capacity to generate and utilise data-driven evidence to influence policy development and implementation are outlined elsewhere in this special double issue of *Administration* (O’Donoghue Hynes, 2026). The guidelines also supported training for the executive stating that ‘policy development/research skills and facilitation skills would be valuable for Directors of Service and their support staff’ (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2014).

In 2024, the IPA was re-engaged by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to undertake a general review of the operation, role and impact of SPCs. The report (IPA, 2024) was commissioned in the context of the changes outlined above in 2014

along with the 2020 *Programme for Government* commitment ‘to mandate the establishment of climate action SPCs’ in each local authority (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020, p. 119). Therefore, a review of the SPC structure was deemed to be timely and it was overseen by a stakeholder working group. The review compared the intent behind the 2014 guidelines and what was actually happening in practice across the sector. While the guidelines stated that SPCs were to ‘assist the council in the formulation, development and review of policy’, the review noted they failed to ‘draw a distinction between local and national policy in the work of SPCs, only ever referring to “policy”’ (IPA, 2024). Furthermore, the primary legislation governing the SPCs were somewhat ambiguous as it does not refer to local policy, thereby ‘leaving the policy role of the SPCs open to interpretation in terms of how it is performed’ and whether the remit also extended to national policy. As a result, the review commented that there needs to be a ‘clear and common understanding’ of the role to be carried out by SPCs (IPA, 2024, p. 11). Indeed, one contributor to the review remarked that there was ‘no clarity around which actual policies the SPC has oversight of or what your body of work should be’ (IPA, 2024). Echoing the lack of clarity, some SPC members stated that they had commenced work on policy proposals only to be told that such policies were beyond the scope of the SPC. Others felt that there was an opportunity to think beyond their own local authorities with the review noting that ‘in line with bottom-up approaches to policymaking, SPCs could provide practical information and feedback on policy proposals to government departments as they develop national policies’ (IPA, 2024). While this ambiguity has at times been problematic, it could also present opportunities for SPCs. For instance, national policies by their nature are often broad allowing SPC members to interpret these goals in ways that suit the specific demographic, geographic, and economic needs of their local communities. Additionally, the disparate composition of SPCs also provides outlets for a broad cohort to come together and discuss national policies enabling diverse voices to shape how local implementation could actually look like without being rigidly bound by prescriptive rules.

Contributors to the review argued that additional supports were needed to empower SPCs in their work. In order to examine evidence and explore policy options, it was felt the council executive could play a greater role. One contributor noted that if an item is to be

considered by the SPC, it ‘requires in-depth research on it before the council can say that yes this is a good idea or good policy’ (IPA, 2024). Therefore, the review commented that supports could involve executive staff identifying strategic issues to include in work programmes or carrying out research on different policy options, thereby allowed SPC members to consider these. Moreover, it was noted that ‘council staff themselves need to be equipped with the necessary skills (e.g. policy-making, writing and research) to effectively support the SPCs’ (IPA, 2024). It is worth noting that from a resource perspective, smaller local authorities may be somewhat inhibited in their SPC support roles compared to larger local authorities which are more likely to have specific in-house skillsets.

Overall, the review did acknowledge that broadly speaking members were positive about many aspects of their SPCs particularly in bringing elected representatives and sectoral interests together as well as attracting ‘individuals who are knowledgeable of key policy areas and often passionate about improving local services’ (IPA, 2024).

Following this review, updated SPC and corporate policy group guidelines (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2024) were adjusted to take into account a number of its recommendations along with additional suggestions from the Stakeholder Working Group. These guidelines built on those from 2014 and also findings from the 2024 IPA review in reinforcing the important role the executive holds in relation to policy support and development particularly in the area of research. Where such expertise cannot be sourced from these bodies, the guidelines recommend that local authorities should ‘consider making funds available for hiring external research expertise’ (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2024). In supporting research opportunities, the guidelines were ultimately trying to set SPCs up for success by encouraging such committees to rigorously assess policy options and in turn build consensus for the policy being proposed.

Case study: Dublin City Council

Notwithstanding the parameters within which SPCs operate as noted in the previous sections, there are examples where SPCs have taken a positive lead in developing policy. In July 2019, Dublin City Council passed a cross-party motion calling for the remunicipalisation of

household waste services.² This initiative initially emerged following a strong campaign spearheaded by trade unions which had called on councillors to support remunicipalisation. Following the cross-party motion, a working group was established to consider the steps necessary to achieve this aim and reported back to the full council in December 2019. On foot of a recommendation for Dublin City Council's executive to conduct research to support the development of a municipalised waste management system for Dublin City, a sub-committee of the Climate Change, Environment and Energy Strategic Policy Committee was created to commission and oversee the research. The research was to address two areas:

1. Review and perform comparative analysis of waste collection systems in Dublin and four other European cities.
2. Consider the above findings and review relevant legal and regulatory changes required as part of a potential remunicipalisation of domestic waste collection services.

In September 2021, the sub-committee appointed the IPA to carry out the research. At the request of the committee, it was agreed that the first phase of the research would provide an analysis of domestic waste collection services in Dublin along with other comparable European cities which would then inform phase two to determine the necessary legal considerations which may be needed in the event domestic waste collection services were to recommence.

The report (IPA, 2023) stated that waste collection in Ireland was 'atypical to other European cities' noting that it is carried out by private companies which have contracts with individual households

² Domestic waste collection services in Dublin City have evolved from a public service to a competitive model, allowing private operators alongside local authorities. Prior to this, collection services were carried out by the local authority sector, financed through general central taxation and treated as a vital public health utility. Following European Union legislation and the Waste Management Act, 1996, private operators were licensed to compete in household waste collection. Private companies often offered lower rates, attracting the majority of paying customers away from local authorities. The Protection of the Environment Act, 2003, enabled local authorities to introduce collection charges aligned with the polluter-pays principle. However, these charges frequently went unpaid by residents who resisted the fees. Consequently, local authorities faced severe operational challenges, including a reduced customer base and high unpaid collection debts. This culminated in Dublin City Council officially exiting the domestic waste market in 2012. In its place, multiple private operators now provide waste collection services across Dublin City.

and ultimately own the waste in terms of how it is then treated. The initial phase intended to identify information and data in respect of collection arrangements for both Dublin City and other comparable cities. While it proved difficult to get 'uniformity across the criteria agreed in respect of the comparative analysis' due to the 'historical, cultural, political and economic reasons why waste has developed' in Dublin and other European cities, important data was captured. Phase one, completed in April 2022, was able to identify several research findings and data relating to the proportion of households living in apartments and houses compared to comparator cities, differences in waste collection arrangements, the comparative waste collection costs, the type of collection systems used, quality of service, environmental considerations, the prevalence or otherwise of illegal dumping and the salaries of those working in the sector.

Using the data and related findings from phase one allowed the second part of the research project to commence. It outlined the evolution of domestic waste collection in Ireland and focused on three potential scenarios which were to be analysed:

1. Recommencing domestic waste collection either on the basis of excluding the private operators or in competition with them.
2. Dublin City Council tendering for waste collection services.
3. Maintaining the current arrangements of private domestic waste collection services coupled with enhanced regulation linked to waste collection permits.

Coupled with the data and findings from phase one, the report was able to draw on interviews with a small number of stakeholders from the waste collection sector along with existing research carried out in relation to possible legal implications in respect of potential changes to existing arrangements. In analysing and exploring each of the scenarios outlined, the report did not make recommendations but rather set out the pathways that could be followed to achieve the initial objective of the original cross-party motion in respect of a return to municipal waste collection services in the Dublin City Council administrative area. It did, however, indicate the likelihood of significant legal challenges associated with the first two options in relation to European Union procurement law, competition law as well as regulatory uncertainty.

Following its publication in 2023, the report received significant media attention underlining the value of SPCs in discharging their policy functions and their capacity to bridge the gap between elected councillors, sectoral experts and council staff on behalf of the public (Malone, 2023). In 2024, the *Dublin City Taskforce Report* highlighted ten ‘Big Moves’ to help revitalise the city, including implementing a dedicated waste management plan for the city centre (Taoiseach’s Taskforce for Dublin, 2024). Furthermore, in 2025 the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications sought views on the feasibility of transitioning Ireland’s municipal waste collection market from its current side-by-side licensing system to a franchise tendering system, as outlined in the report’s second option. RPS, an environmental consultancy, have since been commissioned to do a further study on this.

The approach adopted by Dublin City Council can be reviewed and analysed in the context of the Three Pillar Framework for Policy Development (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025) agreed by the Civil Service Management Board in 2025 and featured in the first part of this special double-issue edition of *Administration* (Smyth, Donnelly & Vaughan, 2026). The framework’s first pillar stresses that good policy must be anchored in research evidence and recommends analysing a wide variety of sources. The study successfully captured detailed information on the domestic waste collection systems of both Dublin and four comparable European cities, allowing the researchers to benchmark Dublin’s current waste collection model against suitable comparators and to comment on the environmental and legal implications of any change in approach. In particular, the research focused on the specific legal and administrative context of domestic waste collection in Ireland and the extent to which any of the proposed changes are feasible.

Centred on feasibility and implementation, the second pillar demands a comprehensive assessment of the actions required to realise the core policy objectives. It reinforces the necessity of validating an intervention’s viability by pre-empting execution and delivery risks. To this end, phase two of the research reviewed three scenarios, systematically evaluating their implications alongside likely legal and regulatory obstacles. In doing so, it helped identify potential vulnerabilities as well as outlining a number of alternatives for consideration in the event changes were to be considered.

The final pillar of legitimacy underscores the need to secure both political and public alignment throughout the policy life cycle. This

relationship is important as policy formulation hinges on the democratic mandate of elected representatives, who remain accountable to the public. The initiative's origin which emerged from a social pillar trade union led campaign and which was ultimately supported by a cross-party motion underscores its strong political backing while the public engagement element has been captured in the consultation carried out by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications in 2025.

A further reflection arising from this case study relates to the conditions that enabled a more evidence-informed approach to emerge. A number of features are worth considering. Firstly, there was a clearly defined policy question to be resolved, initiated by trade unions as representatives of the social pillar, and supported by a cross-party political mandate, which provided direction as well as legitimacy for the initiative. Secondly, the SPC established a dedicated sub-committee tasked with a specific remit, allowing sustained focus on the issue. Thirdly, in order to supplement internal expertise and knowledge of SPC members, the council commissioned independent external research from the IPA, bringing additional skillsets and analytical capacity to the process. Fourthly, the research adopted a phased approach, beginning with comparative analysis and evidence gathering before progressing to the assessment of policy options and related implementation considerations. This sequencing ensured that discussion of potential solutions was grounded in evidence in the first instance. Finally, the process benefited from collaboration between elected members, sectoral representatives, the executive and external experts, reflecting the partnership ethos originally envisaged for SPCs. Collectively, these elements helped create an environment in which policy development could move beyond advocacy and opinion towards a more structured assessment of evidence, feasibility and potential outcomes.

The Dublin City Council case study serves to highlight the positive role SPCs can have in addressing policy issues in a meaningful way. Although the report carried out by the IPA did not recommend a single course of action but a series of options, the process demonstrated the value of SPCs in facilitating evidence-informed policy discussion, highlighting their capacity to bridge local and national policy considerations. As waste is not limited to being solely a local authority issue, the case study also reinforces the opportunities for local authorities via their SPCs to inform and contribute to national policies as well as offering important insights. The attention

that the subject of waste has received since this report was published also indicates that SPCs can act as a catalyst for valuable policy discussions which are in the public interest.

Conclusion

While Irish local government operates within a highly centralised framework, opportunities do exist for policy leadership at the local level, particularly through the SPC model. Their introduction represented a significant reform effort aimed at strengthening local democracy and embedding a more participative approach to policy-making. Emerging from the *Better Local Government* programme (Government of Ireland, 1996), SPCs were designed to shift policy development away from the executive alone and towards a collaborative approach that included both elected members and sectoral representatives with relevant expertise. In theory, this model offered a mechanism to integrate diverse perspectives, enhance the legitimacy of policy decisions, and ensure that local needs and priorities were more effectively reflected in policy outcomes. While intended to be instruments to strengthen local democracy and embed a stronger policy role for elected members, broadly speaking their impact has been uneven since their inception in the late 1990s. This can be attributed to a number of reasons, including the ambiguity of their remit, capacity constraints, as well as the enduring influence of central government. Nonetheless, the development of SPC guidelines which have sought to address issues and the increasing emphasis on research and executive support within local authorities for SPCs mean that they remain a significant vehicle for local policy development.

The recently launched Local Democracy Taskforce notes that SPCs ‘have been integral to the policy-making process’ and facilitate ‘structured involvement of elected members and sectoral interests in policy formulation’ (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2026). Nonetheless, the report acknowledges that the policy development role of SPCs could be enhanced and that SPCs should be strengthened by ‘having them report to the plenary Council on their work programmes’ along with ‘periodic policy reviews to assess if policies have been implemented as agreed or if they require modification’ (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2026). It recommends the establishment of new council oversight and governance committees (COG Committees) to oversee

the performance and governance of local authorities and hold the executive to account, on behalf of the plenary council. It also proposes that such committees should oversee SPCs who would ‘receive clear mandates from the plenary Council for their work programmes’. Additionally, the work of SPCs could be supported by public submissions to assist the development of work programmes (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2026).

While such initiatives, although to be welcomed, are unlikely to occur in the immediate term, the Dublin City Council case study illustrates how SPCs can already operate effectively when supported by a clear political mandate with a specific policy challenge to resolve, structured research, and collaboration between elected members, sectoral groups and the executive. The decision to pursue the remunicipalisation of waste services did not remain at the level of political aspiration; instead, it was translated into a structured, evidence-informed process. By commissioning independent research, adopting a phased analytical approach, exploring multiple policy scenarios and related regulatory risks and barriers, the SPC members along with the executive demonstrated a mature approach to policy development aligned with best practice. Importantly, the process did not seek to arrive at a single solution but rather to expand the range of informed options available to decision makers.

There are a number of clear lessons here for other local authorities. Firstly, an evidence-based approach is critical to policy development. Investing in research capacity whether internally or externally enables SPCs to move beyond discussion fora and to become genuine engines of policy development. High-quality data and evidence not only strengthens policy proposals but also facilitates more informed and constructive deliberation among stakeholders.

Secondly, strong alignment between elected members, sectoral representatives and the executive is crucial in enabling effective SPC functioning, particularly in terms of providing analytical support, identifying strategic priorities, having agreed work programmes in place and fostering a collaborative working environment. The Dublin City Council example shows that when these elements of the local authority system are engaged and adequately resourced, SPCs can function as intended.

Thirdly, and on a broader level, adopting structured frameworks, such as the three-pillar model of data and evidence, feasibility and

implementation, and legitimacy, can provide clarity and discipline to the policy process for local authorities, ensuring that proposals are robust, implementable, and democratically grounded.

Fourthly, there is an opportunity to systematically embed learning and knowledge-sharing across local authorities. While the Dublin City Council case study demonstrates what can be achieved, similar approaches are not yet consistently replicated across the sector. Creating formal mechanisms for sharing best practice – such as inter-authority networks, national guidance on evidence-informed policy development at local authority level, or collaborative research initiatives – could all help to build capacity across all local authorities, particularly smaller ones with fewer resources. By fostering a culture of continuous learning and collaboration, SPCs can evolve from isolated examples of good practice into a more coherent and influential component of Ireland's local governance and policy development system.

Finally, local authorities should recognise the potential of SPCs not only to shape local policy but also to influence national debates. While the nature and subject matter of particular SPCs lend themselves more naturally to local policy development, by generating practical insights from local experience, SPCs can contribute to a more bottom-up approach to policy-making in Ireland. In this way, even within the current system, local government can have a meaningful impact on policy development. Such opportunities are likely to become more structured as the Local Democracy Taskforce has recommended the establishment of formal discussion fora between local and central government as well as mandating government departments and relevant state agencies to proactively engage with the sector on the development of national policy which impacts on local government (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2026). The proposals are likely to reinforce the role and value of SPCs in contributing to these discussions. While such changes will no doubt be eagerly awaited by the local authority sector, the Dublin City Council example demonstrates that with commitment, capacity, and a focus on evidence, SPCs can fulfil their original ambition from thirty years ago, as real drivers of local policy leadership.

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