



**IMPROVING LOCAL SERVICES.
STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNMENT.
MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK.**



FOREWORD

We have a vision for enhanced provision of local services and strengthened local democracy in Ireland. Strong local government which provides localised, efficient, and effective public services is the cornerstone of a healthy democracy. We are proposing an enhanced role of local government in effective service provision; in decision-making; and in rebuilding public confidence in democracy.

Local government is our greatest and most underused resource. It touches every aspect of our daily lives and impacts upon everyone who lives and works in Ireland. It is in our schools, our homes, our public parks. It's in our work, our play and our recreation. It is also the first point of contact that many people in Ireland will have with public services and democratic structures. Our network of local services and amenities are the very fabric of our society. They are the roots that tie our community together. Our integrated network of autonomous local authorities is uniquely positioned as the most direct, immediate, and democratic mechanism for managing our society both economically and socially. Yet our local government has never been fully utilised or given the authority or support to fulfil its enormous potential.

We must also acknowledge that the nature of our society is rapidly changing. How and where we live our lives are constantly evolving. The rigid, centralised system of government and service provision no longer fits the changing face of Ireland. All over Europe societies are realising that the reality of life in the 21st century requires a new, flexible, responsive, and locally based system of government. Strengthening Ireland's local government offers us the unique opportunity to create the solid foundation upon which we can continue to grow, develop, and embrace the changes that lie ahead.

Finally, we understand that trust in the system of government is essential in the delivery of core public services. But years of austerity and financial crisis have eroded people's trust in government and seen the rise of extreme and populist movements across the world. That lack of trust is one of the greatest challenges facing our society today. By strengthening and protecting local government we will be empowering citizens to play a more direct role in shaping communities and tackling the issues that affect them. Most importantly, strengthening local government is the only enduring way of reclaiming trust in our institutions, our system of government, and our society.

With your help, we can improve local services in our communities, for people now and for future generations.

Let's build a better system of local government and local services. Let's bring More Power to You.

Signed,



**MORE
POWER
TO YOU**

Make Government Local,
Improve Your Local Services.



FORSA



OUR FIVE POLICY PILLARS

DEMOCRACY

- Provide adequate investment and independent funding powers for local authorities.
- Fully implement the EU Charter on Local Self-Government, inclusive of the Additional Protocol.
- Commit to promoting a culture that is free from hate-speech and intolerance, and not to work with representatives who are contrary to this.
- Support initiatives to establish directly elected mayors in each local authority.



WASTE

- Support legislative changes to the Waste Management Act, 1996 which would provide for the return of waste collection services to local authorities.
- Support the development of initiatives within local authorities for the remunicipalisation of waste collection services.



WATER

- Endorse the holding of a constitutional referendum to ensure public water ownership.



HOUSING

- Support the establishment of local authority-led cost rental public housing.
- Commit to increasing local authority direct labour for the delivery of home energy upgrades, preventative maintenance, and effective void management.
- Endorse the holding of a referendum which would establish the constitutional right to housing.



ENERGY & CLIMATE

- Support local authorities to lead micro-generation and community ownership of renewable energy projects.



INTRODUCTION

Enshrined in our constitution is the simple principle that strong, effective local government is the foundation of a prosperous and progressive society. Over several decades, four factors have impacted local government and its ability to play a direct role in decision-making and public services provision. The effects of this are still seen today, leaving communities with little democratic power.

- **AUSTERITY** has led to declining funding from central government and this, combined with difficulties in collecting commercial rates and a drastic fall in revenue from development levies, has led to a vicious cycle of cumulative erosion of local authority power and capacity.
- **PRIVATISATION** of former local government services such as domestic waste services – which has not led to improved services for citizens but has led to poorer quality of employment for workers.
- **EXECUTIVE DIRECTION** has occurred as new public management processes and changes in administration, evaluation and control mechanisms have increased executive power at the expense of political representatives.
- **CENTRALISATION** of power to national government continues to strip local authorities of their responsibilities in delivering key services. Various essential services in water, education, health and safety have been lost to central or regional government, or to newly established quangos. Where local authorities were once responsible, higher education student grants are now provided through SUSI; and driving licenses through the NDSL.

Ireland has among the lowest levels of local representation per capita and one of the weakest local governments in Europe. A recent European Commission assessment of local government places Ireland at the bottom of the local autonomy index for the European Union, ahead of only Cyprus and Malta.

Ireland is a signatory of the European Charter of Local Self-Government which aims to promote the autonomy and decision-making power of local councils. However, the Council of Europe states that Ireland has failed to meet its obligations under 12 of the 20 principles in the Charter. These include the right and ability of local authorities to manage a substantial share of public affairs in the interests of the local population; having appropriate administrative structures and resources; and in the financing of local authorities.

The undermining of essential public services in the areas of waste, water, and housing are impacting everyday life and are eroding trust in our system of government. Strengthening local government is not just the most direct and effective way of improving services, providing for communities and restoring trust in our society – it is the only way.



DEMOCRACY



We are seeking a commitment to:

- Provide adequate investment and independent funding powers for local authorities.
- Fully implement the EU Charter on Local Self-Government, inclusive of the Additional Protocol.
- Commit to promoting a culture that is free from hate-speech and intolerance, and not to work with representatives who are contrary to this.
- Support initiatives to establish directly elected mayors in each local authority.

Ireland among the worst in europe

Irish local government scores poorly – compared to our European neighbours and globally – in relation to:

- Relative strength, size and structure of local authority units;
- Balance of power between executive, administrative and elected parts of local government;
- Range of functions for which local government has responsibility;
- Relationship between central and local government;
- Financial autonomy of local government.

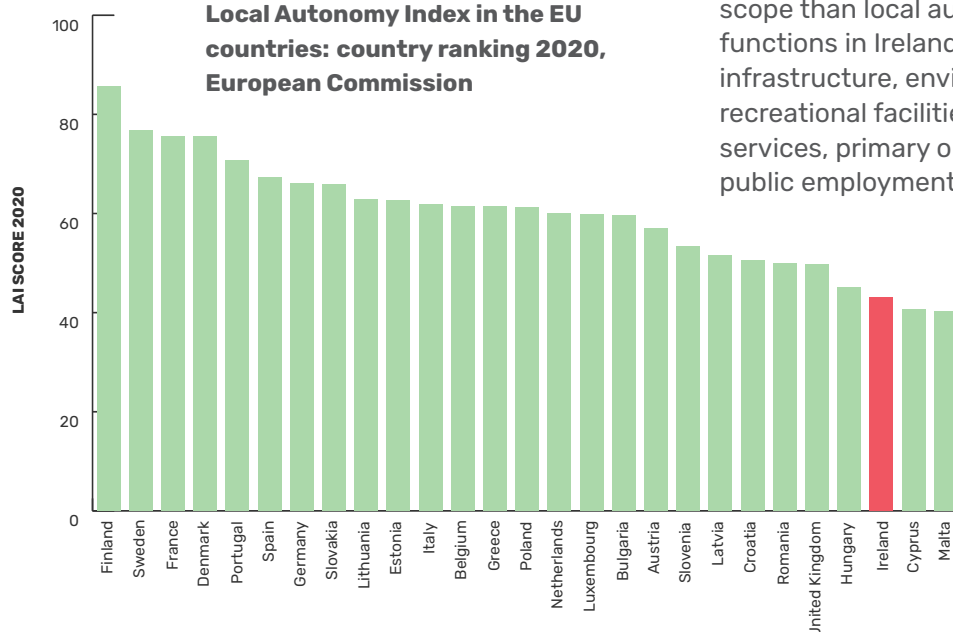
These factors have reduced Irish local government's democratic legitimacy and Ireland is now last in the international index of self-autonomy.

Ireland has far fewer local municipalities with only one city or county council per 151,078 people compared to one council per:

- 58,459 people in Denmark;
- 44,816 people in the Netherlands;
- 34,218 people in Sweden;
- 17,670 people in Finland;
- 7,472 people in Croatia¹.

In relation to spending power, on average across the EU, 23.1% of public spending occurs at local government level compared to 8% in Ireland. Likewise, Irish local authorities have a narrower scope than local authorities do internationally with functions in Ireland revolving around physical infrastructure, environmental issues and recreational facilities. There are few social or care services, primary or specialist education, health or public employment services.

Fig 1:
Local Autonomy Index in the EU countries: country ranking 2020, European Commission



1 OECD (2018), Key data on Local and Regional Governments in the European Union (brochure), OECD, Paris, www.oecd.org/regional/regional-policy

Reimagining and restoring local democracy

The Council of Europe (2013) strongly criticised Ireland for its lack of constitutional protection for local government and stressed its importance in articulating shared community interests, and factoring local history, geography, political culture and economy into its decision-making processes. In fact, in Ireland, austerity, privatisation, executive direction, and centralisation have only further undermined an already weak system of local government and worsened the delivery of services to the public.

International evidence demonstrates that over four decades of privatisation of formerly local public

services has failed to deliver on promises of improved investment, performance and efficiency. The innovative Australian Peoples Inquiry into privatisation highlighted the damage to citizens, especially the most vulnerable, when local public services are privatised.

Interestingly, experience with deprivatisation or remunicipalisation has demonstrated the benefits of public services from improved quality of services to greater financial transparency. Local authority-led provision has more capacity to meet environmental and equality objectives and, from an efficiency and equality perspective, to integrate public services and provide affordable services, both of which are crucial for local authorities to meet their public duty to promote human rights and equality.

WASTE



We are seeking a commitment to:

- Support legislative changes to the Waste Management Act, 1996 which would provide for the return of waste collection services to local authorities.
- Support the development of initiatives within local authorities for the remunicipalisation of waste collection services.

Many councils, faced with an unviable business model for domestic refuse, exited waste management and this has ultimately resulted in a 'quasi market' for waste which is poorly regulated with environmental and other costs. Private refuse services are not only unaccountable, but the current 'quasi market' model has led to cartel-like private bin collection services which have proved uncompetitive, inefficient and unable to provide affordable services or consistent coverage. The lack of competition is evident in that:

- Only 20 main operators service 90% of households that avail of a collection service;
- 18% of households nationally, and 25% in the Dublin region, do not have choice of provision from multiple suppliers;
- 23% of households do not have a waste-collection service at all.

This leaves room for a significant number of illegal practices such as illegal dumping or fly tipping in both urban and rural areas – 44,868 tonnes of waste were unmanaged in 2016 – with the ultimate clean-up costs borne by local councils. A recent Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) report highlights the degree to which the

unique Irish waste management market is highly inefficient in enabling a competitive market. The report concludes that domestic waste collection is “a natural monopoly”. In this context, it's worth noting that Scotland, having privatised its household waste collection service, has since remunicipalised it with a different economic model.

An Institution of Public Administration research report on the remunicipalisation of waste services in Dublin City Council, found that just four waste collection companies account for almost three-quarters of the Dublin City market. Of the five international comparator cities surveyed, Dublin was the only city with a fully privatised system, with all others including a strong element of public involvement either through direct collection of waste through publicly owned companies or with publicly owned companies managing the service through private tenders for kerbside waste collection.

The report outlines the potential steps to achieve a return to full municipalisation and how to address the legal challenges involved in doing so. It concludes that in order to return waste collection services to local authorities, and provide legal certainty for local authorities, amendments to the Waste Management Act 1996 will be required.

WATER

We are seeking a commitment to:

- Endorse the holding of a constitutional referendum to ensure public water ownership.

Ireland has had a low level of investment in water infrastructure and, up to 2015, 45% of such investment was delivered through public private partnerships (PPPs) – the 2nd highest use of PPPs in the EU next to Greece. Over 2014/15, as water was centralised from local to national level, investment has increased and Ervia has discontinued the use of PPPs.

Given that water is a public good – which is essential for public health and well-being – such public control over the level of investment in water infrastructure is essential; hence, the public demand to guarantee public ownership of water into the future and the specific demand for a constitutional referendum. It's worth noting that such water-related referendums have been conducted at municipal and national levels across Europe.

The Joint Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services has supported the concept of a referendum on the issue of water services, and



a November 2018 ministerial memo to cabinet has proposed a referendum to stipulate that ownership of a water services authority must be retained by the State or a State-controlled body.

HOUSING

We are seeking a commitment to:

- Support the establishment of local authority-led cost rental public housing.
- Commit to increasing local authority direct labour for the delivery of home energy upgrades, preventative maintenance, and effective void management.
- Endorse the holding of a referendum which would establish the constitutional right to housing.



The shift away from the role of local authorities in the provision of public housing has been a long-term trend which began in the 1980s. The traditional provision of council housing has been displaced by the growing importance of private sector rental subsidies including the most recent Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).

From the perspective of the citizen, secure social housing is infinitely preferable to insecure private sector housing. Cost rental models of accommodation are at the heart of a sustainable model, in practice this means changing the financial, rental, letting and maintenance model for public housing provision and making this new model the primary vehicle for delivering public housing.



ENERGY & CLIMATE

We are seeking a commitment to:

- Support local authorities to lead micro-generation and community ownership of renewable energy projects.

Experience shows that State-based investment is central to realising new forms of renewable energy and, in many countries, processes of local democratic participation recognise the degree to which innovation needs to be vested in local authorities to generate community buy-in, engagement and ownership in transition processes. In addition, local authorities have a key role in promoting and implementing energy efficiency measures.



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