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Local Democracy Taskforce

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Stakeholder
Engagement Process

Introduction

Fórsa welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Local Democracy Taskforce.

Fórsa represents more than 12,000 workers in local government and services, including clerical, administrative, management, technical and professional staff, as well as general operatives and supervisory grades across the greater Dublin area.

Preamble

Strong local government, which provides localised, efficient, and effective public services, is the cornerstone of a healthy democracy. Enshrined in our Constitution is the simple principle that strong, effective local government is the foundation of a prosperous and progressive society. We believe that there should be an enhanced role of local government in the service provision to local communities, 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 and our public parks. It is 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. Local government represents the greatest interrelationship between citizens and the State.

10,000 council jobs were lost following the financial crisis. Services were only maintained because staff undertook additional duties above their pay grades. In the public sector, local authorities suffered the greatest reduction of numbers of employees during the austerity era, which has resulted in significant grade drift in the sector.

Austerity, privatisation, executive direction, and centralisation have hollowed out our public services and stripped local authorities and local communities of their democratic power. Ireland now has the worst level of local representation and the weakest local government of any country in Europe. Today our local government is actively being degraded. Essential public services like housing, water, energy, and waste are being undermined and trust in our system of government is being eroded day by day. Fórsa has been calling for a reform of local government which would enhance the provision of services to communities across Ireland while also strengthening democracy. Ultimately, this would entail an enhanced role of local government in effective service provision; in decision-making; and in rebuilding public confidence in democracy.

Recommendations

Fórsa believes that there are a number of reforms that would enhance local government, covering water, waste, housing and energy services, and these include:

- Fully implement the European Charter on Local Self-Government, including the Additional Protocol.
- An end to the trend of outsourcing in local authorities.
- Further legislative changes to facilitate directly elected mayors with real power and funding.
- Legislative changes to the Waste Management Act 1996 which would provide for the return of waste collection services to local authorities.
- Provide support for initiatives within local authorities for the re-municipalisation of waste collection services.
- Increased revenue and funding powers with parallel systems of accountability and transparency to move the percentage of local authority-managed public spending towards the European average.

- An immediate end to the outsourcing of council housing maintenance, and a shift to a new local authority-led housing model.
- Increase local authority direct labour for the delivery of home energy upgrades, preventative maintenance, and effective void management.
- Commit to a referendum which would establish a constitutional right to housing
- Stronger regulation of wastewater, to ensure that every household has access to an affordable waste disposal service.
- A constitutional referendum on the right to water, which should enshrine that water and wastewater services remain in public ownership and control forever.
- Support local authorities to lead micro-generation and community ownership of renewable energy projects.
- An investment in local authority environmental and sustainable energy infrastructure and staff to facilitate the maximum use of the SEAI better energy programmes.

European Charter on Local Self-Government

The Council of Europe's 'European Charter on Local-Self Government' commits the parties to applying basic rules guaranteeing the political, administrative and financial independence of local authorities. It provides that the principle of local self-government shall be recognised in domestic legislation and, where practicable, in the constitution. Local authorities are to be elected through universal suffrage.¹

What is the Additional Protocol?

The Additional Protocol provides an international legal guarantee of the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority. The right to participate in the affairs of a local authority denotes the right to seek to determine or to influence the exercise of a local authority's powers and responsibilities. Parties to this Protocol are required to take legal and other measures to facilitate the exercise of and give effect to this right. Ireland has not signed the additional protocol, but the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage gave a commitment to sign the additional protocol in February 2024.²

The charter in Ireland

Ireland signed the Charter in 1997 and ratified it in 2002. Twenty-one years later in 2023, a report from the Council of Europe declared that there was "a lot to be done before local self-government in Ireland is on par with other European countries (Europe, 2023)." It further described Ireland's democratic structure as "one of the most centralised countries in Europe" (Europe, 2023).

The 2023 report from the Council of Europe underscores Ireland's repeated failure to properly commit to adequate local government structures. Ireland has a duty to more readily meet its obligations as set out in the Charter.

¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/impact-convention-human-rights/european-charter-of-local-self-government#/>

² <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-02-13/411/>

Outsourcing

Recommendation

- An end to the trend of outsourcing in local authorities

The provision of local services is a critical function of local authorities. Unfortunately, some local authorities in Ireland consistently seek to outsource a broad range of services. This often occurs without consultation³ with unions,⁴ contrary to the provisions of successful national agreements, which has led to frequent industrial disputes between unions and councils as employers.

The drive to outsource services occurs in an environment in which successive public sector pay deals have made firm and clear commitments to use direct labour “where consistent with efficient and effective public service delivery.”

In some cases, the move to privatise services has led to unusual alternatives being deployed. Such as with waste management. In January 2023 a report from the Institute for Public Administration showed that, of the five cities examined, Dublin was the only one to operate a fully privatised waste management system.⁵ The report further noted that only Dublin appeared to have significant issues with illegal dumping.⁶ Workers were also paid less in comparison to their counterparts in other cities.⁷

Services that are outsourced to the private sector unnecessarily relegate service provision to second place behind a profit motive. In such circumstances maintenance of the quality of the service can only be prioritised where it serves the profit motive. Failure to generate enough profit is likely to result in the closure or withdrawal of service. Entrusting local authority services to this environment is not appropriate.

Staffing

Recommendation

- Increase the number of full-time equivalent staff working for local authorities in Ireland.

The full-time equivalent (FTE) staff compliment for local authorities in Q4 of 2008 was 35,007.53.⁸ In Q4 of 2024 that had dropped to 32,372.40.⁹ During this period Ireland recorded a population increase of 957,000 from 4,422,100 in August 2008¹⁰ to 5,380,000 in April 2024.¹¹ This means there has been a reduction of 7.5% in FTE staff working in local authorities at a time when there was a 21% increase in the population.

While it is important to note that staffing levels have increased from a low of 26,630.36 FTE in 2015, the staffing numbers are still far below what should be expected in local authorities.

There is a significant burden being placed on staff who often feel overworked and overburdened. In 2023 88.7% of staff in local authorities indicated that the issue of staff shortages was important or very important to them. 48.1% of respondents were concerned that they would burnout and 32.8% felt that their workload was unsustainable.

3 <https://forsatradeunion.newsweaver.com/designtest/iq6pu5aws7j>

4 <https://forsatradeunion.newsweaver.com/designtest/11dwsne26u8>

5 <https://www.forsa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/IPA-Research-Report-Remunicipalisation-of-Waste.pdf>

6 <https://www.forsa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/IPA-Research-Report-Remunicipalisation-of-Waste.pdf>

7 <https://www.forsa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/IPA-Research-Report-Remunicipalisation-of-Waste.pdf>

8 https://databank.per.gov.ie/Public_Service_Numbers.aspx?rep=LA

9 https://databank.per.gov.ie/Public_Service_Numbers.aspx?rep=LA

10 https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2008/popmig_2008.pdf

11 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-yin/ireland2024theyearinnumbers/>

The reduction in staffing numbers has led to a significant number of people undertaking work of a grade above them. In the Fórsa survey 80% of respondents stated that they would apply for a job evaluation scheme if one was to be opened.

Local authorities need to significantly increase the FTE staff compliment to ensure consistent and sustainable delivery of services to local communities across Ireland.

Structures

Chief Executives of local authorities hold significant executive power, though unelected by the community the local authority serves. New public management processes and changes in administration, evaluation and control mechanisms have increased executive power, which can be at the expense of the elected councillors. There is now a required re-balancing of power between the executive, administrative and elected councillors of local government in a way which ensures democratic legitimacy and maintains professionalism.

Directly elected mayors

Fórsa believes that there should be further legislative changes to facilitate directly elected mayors with real power and funding.

Plebiscites

The 2016 programme for Government made a commitment to “consider directly elected mayors in cities” as part of wider commitments around local government reform.¹² In 2019 plebiscites were held in Waterford, Cork and Limerick to ask voters if they wished to directly elect their mayor. Limerick voted in favour of the proposition by a margin of 52.4% in favour to 47.6% against. Voters in Cork and Waterford narrowly rejected the idea.¹³

The 2020 programme for Government made further commitments to “allow for plebiscites to be held in 2024 in any local authority that wishes to have a directly elected mayor.”¹⁴

The issue of a directly elected mayor for Dublin was referred to a citizen's assembly. This report recommended a directly elected mayor for Dublin in December 2022.¹⁵ Despite this, the 2025 programme for Government includes only a weak commitment to “consider further plebiscites” for directly elected mayors in Dublin and other cities.¹⁶ This is one of a number of examples of report recommendations being ignored or deprioritised by Government after publication.

¹² <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/publications/programme-for-government-programme-for-a-partnership-government/>

¹³ <https://www.rte.ie/news/politics/2019/0527/1052049-mayor-votes-results/>

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/publications/programme-for-government-our-shared-future/>

¹⁵ https://citizensassembly.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/report_dublincitizensassembly_final_lowres.pdf

¹⁶ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/programme-for-government-securing-irelands-future.pdf>

Funding

Ireland's Public Spending Explained 2024 report¹⁷ shows that Ireland's spending through local government is one of the lowest in the EU, with only Greece, Cyprus and Malta spending less. Not only is it one of the lowest, but most European countries are spending five times more than Ireland through local and regional government when considered for size and population.¹⁸

Allocation

Fórsa is calling for the provision of sufficient funding to allow local authorities to adequately carry out their functions and increasing public spending at local authority level to European averages.

Furthermore, the allocation of funding to local government from central government must be indicated further in advance of the year ending, so that local government can publish its annual budgets in a timelier manner similar to that of the annual Finance Bill by the Department of Public Expenditure which takes place in the autumn of the preceding year. This would support improved transparency and accountability of local councils in relation to their individual annual budgets.

Revenue raising measures

Local authorities should have the authority to raise revenue through independent means. This would allow local authorities to more effectively meet the needs of their communities and respond to new and emerging challenges.

Additionally, it would facilitate innovation in public service delivery and support greater civic engagement by drawing a more direct link between local taxation and the provision of public services.

It should be noted that the provision of independent revenue raising measures for local authorities should be seen as an addition to national revenue streams rather than an alternative. As noted elsewhere in this report and documented extensively elsewhere, the existing funding provisions for local authorities at a national level are well below adequate levels.

Functions

Chief Executives of local authorities hold significant executive power. New public management processes and changes in administration, evaluation and control mechanisms have increased executive power in our local authorities and can be at the expense of the elected councillors. This means decisions are often made without democratic accountability and can lead to a democratic deficit. There is now a required re-balancing of power between the executive, administrative and elected councillors of local government in a way which ensures democratic legitimacy and maintains professionalism.

17 <https://publicpolicy.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Irelands-Public-Spending-Explained-2024-1.pdf>

18 <https://publicpolicy.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Irelands-Public-Spending-Explained-2024-1.pdf>

Ireland also scores very poorly compared to European countries in relation to the range of functions for which local government has responsibility. The last decade has seen a centralisation of power to national government which continues to strip local authorities of their responsibilities in delivering key services. Services once led by local authorities, have since been lost to central government or regional government or to newly established quangos. Examples of this include the administration of higher education student grants, which are now provided through Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) rather than local authorities, and the provision of driving licenses through the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS).

Waste collection

Waste collection recommendations:

- Legislative changes to the Waste Management Act 1996 which would provide for the return of waste collection services to local authorities.
- Provide support for initiatives within local authorities for the re-municipalisation of waste collection services.

Privatised waste services have not been successful.¹⁹ They remain unaccountable, have proved to be 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, and 23% of households do not have a waste collection service at all.²⁰

This creates a space for the proliferation 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 cleanup costs borne by local councils.²¹

The 2018 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 re-municipalised it with a different economic model.

An Institution of Public Administration research report on the re-municipalisation 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. Fórsa has called for this legislative work to begin in order to provide for a full return of waste collection services to local authorities.

19 <https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/Waste%20Management%20in%20Europe.%20Good%20Jobs%20in%20the%20Circular%20Economy%20for%20web.pdf>

20 <https://www.ccpc.ie/business/research/market-studies/household-waste-collection-market/#:~:text=The%20CCPC's%20analysis%20found%20that,advantage%20for%20a%20single%20operator>

21 <https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/waste/national-waste-statistics/Municipal-2016-data.pdf>

Waste collection pilots

Fórsa's municipal workers have been a leading voice in calling for the re-municipalisation of waste services, and the union welcomes the recommendation of the Oireachtas Committee Report on the Circular Economy (2024), to establish a pilot scheme to re-municipalise waste in Dublin City Local Authority.

There was a similar recommendation in the report released by the Taoiseach's Taskforce for Dublin, also released in late 2024. Thus far neither of these recommendations have been acted upon and a reply from the Chief Executive in March 2025 stated that there "was no current plans to pilot the recommencement of kerbside pickup" and that the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications had not provided Dublin City Council with a timeline for a feasibility study on this work proposed in October 2024.

Housing

Housing recommendations

- An immediate end to the outsourcing of council housing maintenance, and a shift to a new local authority-led housing model;
- Increase local authority direct labour for the delivery of home energy upgrades, preventative maintenance, and effective void management
- Commit to a referendum which would establish a 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 replaced by private sector rental subsidies, most notably the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). This, together with the Rental Accommodation Scheme, accounted for one-third of local authority overall spending in 2023 according to the 2023 local council budgets.²²

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.

Water

Water recommendations

- A constitutional referendum on the right to water, which should enshrine that water and wastewater services remain in public ownership and control forever;

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.

²² <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2024/0527/1451449-local-councils-ireland-funding-functions-finances-local-elections-2024/>

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.

Energy and climate

Energy and climate recommendations

- 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.

Conclusion

Fórsa trade union welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the taskforce. As a union we believe in strong local government and local services. It is the view of the union that the issues at local government level have been well signposted and that the various attempts by government to address those issues have been half-hearted and are often derailed for political expediency resulting in limited success.

An opportunity exists to recalibrate the role and function of local authorities, ensuring that they can meet their full potential for the delivery of quality services for communities.

There is a pathway to more properly funded local authorities providing a range of services across the country. Our submission has focused on contributing to that journey. As a union we will continue to advocate for strong local government and local services in Ireland.



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