
AILG BRIEFING PAPER ON MEASURES TO BE INCLUDED IN A PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS

MEASURES TO BOOST LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Introduction

It is the position of the AILG, that any negotiated Programme for Government (PFG) should recognise, protect and strengthen the central role of local government in recovering, rebuilding and renewing Ireland post Covid-19, and into the future.

As is evident from their key role in supporting communities and citizens in the course of the pandemic, Local Authorities are particularly well placed to promote and enhance community health, wellbeing and quality of life.

The wide-ranging role of Local Authorities in the areas of housing, economic development, community development, the arts, provision of green spaces, public realm, climate change, makes them central to achieving strong and speedy recovery in all areas of public life.

A Programme for Government must recognise, protect and strengthen the central role of Local Government in recovering, rebuilding and renewing Ireland post Covid-19, and into the future.

Strengthening the role of Local Authorities

In 2012 the then government published “Putting People First” (PPF) which brought about fundamental changes to our local government system. PPF stated that the Vision for Local Government in Ireland would be that “Local government will be the main vehicle of governance and delivery of public service at local level leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably”.

Local Authorities have over the last 5 years embraced the new delivery of services in areas such as local economic development, local community development, climate action and more recently leading the local response to the Covid-19 crisis.

This has shown that Local Government can be the vehicle to deliver more services at local level and consideration should be given to devolving more responsibility for the delivery of services at local level. A PFG should include a cross government department instruction to devolve appropriate powers, functions and the delivery of services at local level through local authorities.

Examples of additional service delivery that could be considered for delivery at local authority level could include in areas such as;

- Transport – Responsibility for delivery of rural transport services including local link transport services.
- Social Services/Care – Responsibility for delivery of pre-school services (Community Creches), home care services/social care packages for the elderly etc. The recent example of the roll-out of the Covid-19 Community Response Committees and Helplines is a clear example of how local government can play a role in the delivery of social care.
- Education – stronger linkages between LAs and Education bodies in the planning and delivery of Further Education/Adult Education.
- Security- Community CCTV Schemes.
- Delivery of City/Town & Village Renewal Schemes and Regeneration Projects.
- Climate Action, Warmer Home programmes, Energy Efficient Schemes, Bio-diversity etc.

In relation to the progression of a Directly Elected Mayor for Limerick and possibly for other city areas into the future, it is imperative that the existing powers of the Elected Members in any city adopting this governance model are not diminished. As the national representative members body, the AILG should have the opportunity to contribute to the process of determining the way this role develops.

A Programme for Government must include a clear commitment to increase and strengthen the powers, functions, responsibilities and services delivered at Local Government level.

A National Economic Recovery Plan

It will be essential to engage Local Authorities in the development of a national economic plan to respond to Covid-19. Local Enterprise Offices have played a key role in supporting SMEs and independent businesses over the last number of years as we emerged from the recent recession and their response to the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to be crucial for this sector. They have strong local knowledge of where support is needed e.g. areas hit by a drop in tourism, or where town centres have been seriously impacted.

A Programme for Government must commit to engaging Local Authorities in the development and delivery of a National Economic Recovery Plan to respond to Covid-19

Health and Healthcare

Physical and mental health is impacted strongly by the availability of green spaces, walking/cycling infrastructure, play spaces for children – all of which form part of the remit of the Local Authorities. It is essential that Local Authorities, and councillors in particular, are an integral part of the future health infrastructure.

A Programme for Government must provide that the new Regional Health Areas restore the role of Councillors on their governance structures in order to strengthen the links between local authorities and health authorities.

Housing

Any new Programme for Government should ensure the primacy of Local Authorities in continuing to be the lead provider of social and affordable housing and that LAs are central to any public housing delivery programme.

The PFG needs to facilitate LAs in this role through the financing model for LAs role in public housing provision, and by minimum red tape in approvals for housing developments. Local authorities will be specially well placed to kick start construction by smaller builders as part of the economic recovery plan.

Multi annual funding is essential for LAs to adopt and deliver effective programmes, for example in areas such as Traveller Accommodation.

A Programme for Government must ensure the primacy of Local Authorities in continuing to be the lead provider of social and affordable housing and that LAs are central to any public housing delivery programme.

Resources

In order to ensure that local government is the vehicle for delivery of public services at local level, local authorities must be properly resourced in order to deliver its current range of functions and services but also will need proper resources to deliver any further functions and services that could be devolved to them. In any new PFG a clear commitment should be given to ensure that;

- Local government is properly resourced and funded to effectively deliver services at local level for its current service delivery but also for the delivery of any additional functions and services that could be devolved and delivered at local level.
- Commitment that Local Government Income will not be impacted by the Covid-19 crisis and additional central government financial funding assistance will be available to local authorities to ensure that the delivery of local services are not adversely affected.

- Comprehensive review of the funding of Local Authorities including;
 - ❖ Review of Local Property Tax including its distribution, purpose and spending areas that it can be used for.
 - ❖ Review of the Local Government Fund (LGF) and its funding streams for Local Authorities
- Reserved function for elected members to approve local authority capital budgets in line with their reserved function to approve their revenue budgets.
- Complete overhaul and review of the commercial rates system including the current valuations process and the immediate enacting of rates incentives schemes, alleviation schemes proposals etc.
- Increased central exchequer funding including capital grants.

A Programme for Government must commit that Local Government is properly resourced and funded to effectively deliver services at local level.

Representation

The public face of our local authorities are the democratically elected councillors. The elected council is in law, the policy-making arm of the local authority with councillors having the role of creating the overall policy framework that the council's executive and staff work within.

All of the structural, governance and accountability changes delivered under Putting People First were seeking to enhance and widen the role and functions of the elected council. **One of the fundamental aims of the reform programme was to reaffirm the primacy of the elected members in our local government system** and to examine the default provision which grants the executive, power to act unless powers are specifically assigned to members. This, coupled with the position of the local authority manager being replaced by a chief executive post, was to reinforce the principle that the chief executive of a council should be accountable to the elected members in the discharge of all of his/her functions, in the same way as a chief executive of a company reports to a board of directors.

It is our opinion that this fundamental aim of the last reform programme has failed to deliver the primacy of the elected members in our local government system and it is our strong view that any PFG needs to re-balance the power from the executive back to the elected council.

To ensure that the role, power and functions of the Elected Members are strengthened, a clear commitment needs to be given in a PFG that the Elected Members are central and at the heart of our local government system. This can be achieved by committing to;

- Ensuring that a rebalance is made in the powers from the Executive back to the Elected Council.

- Current powers of the Elected Members are strengthened and a clear commitment that existing powers of Elected Members are safeguarded and protected.
- Commitment to ensure better diversity and participation at local government level particularly for women, younger people, non-national residents and minority groups.
- Any additional powers devolved to Local Government are devolved to the Elected Council and not to the Executive.
- Area Committees should be put on the same statutory footing as Municipal Districts.
- Expanding the budgetary powers of the Elected Members particularly at Municipal District level.
- Immediate publication of the Moorhead Report on the Review of the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members and delivery on any recommendations that may contained in the report. It is vital that the Elected Members are properly resourced to effectively carry out their important statutory and representative role as Local Authority Elected Members.

A Programme for Government must commit to re-balancing the power from the Executive back to the Elected Council and provide for the immediate publication and delivery of the Moorhead Report on the Review of the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members.

The above clearly sets out a vision for the strengthening of our local government system going forward. It is imperative that any PFG negotiated needs to clearly set out the principle that the Elected Member needs to at the heart of our local government system.

If you have any further queries please contact me or our Directors, Tommy Moylan & Liam Kenny at 01 - 6106100, mobile 086 – 8236386 & 087-2872704 or email at info@ailg.ie.

Kind Regards

Mick

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