

Submission to Galway Local Government Review:

Association of Irish Local Government

**The Secretariat,
Galway Local Government Review Committee,
City Hall,
College Road,
Galway**

Dear Secretary

The Association of Irish Local Government has been asked by members in Galway County Council and Galway City Council to present to you their reasoned opposition to any question of unifying the two authorities that might arise in the process of your review of local government arrangements in Galway.

Their opposition to such unification is based on their local knowledge and their experience of representing their constituents on a daily basis. This submission is not negative in tone as it sets out realistic options – already provided for in local government law – which could be deployed to bring about enhanced inter-authority co-operation on the delivery of services while retaining the relationship between the democratically elected councils and citizens.

A particular concern expressed was that the review might be inclined to give weight to so-called efficiencies on the corporate level while not valuing properly the importance of genuinely local representation. Distance does matter in terms of the quality of representation achievable; if elected members are spread too thinly this amounts to a disenfranchising of the voters in question.

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More specifically - and in addition to - the foregoing deeply held concern, the councillors put forward the issues set out below to expand on their reasoned opposition to any unification.

1. A united Galway would create a total population of 250,000 (2011 Census). This figure would rank Galway as the fifth most populous county and not far behind South Dublin with 265,000 and Fingal with 273,000. Yet while these counties have compact spatial footprints, Galway's population would be spread across an area of 6,100 km squared. It is not generally appreciated that Galway has the second largest land area of any county. In more easily visualised terms the distance from Ballinasloe in the east to Clifden in the west is of the order of 140 km. In our members' view a unification of the city and county would create the worst of all worlds – a big population spread across a big county. This would militate against *bona fide* local representation. The difficulties being reported by our members in large electoral areas created by the 2014 reforms such as West Clare and West Mayo are real-time warnings as to the perils of stretching the mandate too thinly.

2. Both authorities have a high level of co-operation in their current configuration. For example Galway County Council provides key local authority services such as Fire Brigades, Libraries and Motor Tax for the population living in the City. Similarly road design services in relation to the topical by-pass plan which is mostly within the city bounds is being carried out by the Galway Co Co/NRA Design Team. It is felt that there is scope for similar further cross boundary co-operation on a service-by-service basis but without interfering with the democratic configuration of the two authorities. There is ample scope under existing local government law for the making of such agreements and the deployment of modern mechanisms of corporate agreement such as Service Level Agreements and Memorandums of Understanding further underline the rich repertoire of measures available to facilitate co-operation without either body losing its democratic identity.

3. Galway City Council has worked hard at creating a dynamic cultural image where festivals, the arts and the port-city urban experience are parts of its offering to the public. There is concern that such a well-defined urban cultural characteristic would be diluted if forced into the configuration of a wider county arrangement. This success is recognised by Galway County Councillors who would equally share the concern that the city's distinctive identity based on its urban cultural assets would be overshadowed in any merger type outcome.

4. Galway County Council for its part is already dealing with a large and complex county area. The point has been made that there are in fact two quite different cultures in the county. Firstly, there is Connemara and the county west of the Corrib where there are distinctive Gaeltacht, maritime and island influences. Secondly there is the quite different part of the county east of the Corrib which is notable for its prominent towns such as Tuam, Athenry, Ballinasloe and Loughrea, together with a large rural population and productive agricultural hinterland. To interject a third population dynamic into what is already a complex county might create a sense of incoherence in the body politic.

5. It might be noted that in the 2014 local government reforms Galway County has already lost three units of local government, namely the Town Councils of Ballinasloe, Loughrea and Tuam. Any move towards unification would further erode the level of service and representation to the people of these and other areas.

The Association feels that the points put forward by our Galway members are reasoned and realistic and we request that they be given full consideration by the review committee.

We would appreciate if this submission was acknowledged in your final report.

Yours faithfully

Liam Kenny

Directo