



The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government

Research Commissioned by the Association of Irish Local Government

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Abbreviations

AC	Area Committee
AILG	Association of Irish Local Government
BMW	Border Midland and Western
CCMA	County and City Management Association
CDP	County/City Development Plan
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
Cllr.	Councillor
CLRAE	Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe
COSLA	Convention of Scottish Local Authorities
CDP	Continuous Professional Development
CPO	Compulsory Purchase Order
DEG	Digital-Era Governance
DEM	Directly Elected Mayor
DHLGH	Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
ESB	Electricity Supply Board
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
Govt.	Government

HSE	Health Service Executive
ICLRD	International Centre for Local and Regional Development
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IPA	Institute of Public Administration
LA	Local Authority
LAMA	Local Authorities Members Association
LCDC	Local Community Development Committee
LEA	Local Electoral Area
LECP	Local Economic and Community Plan
LGIU	Local Government Information Unit
LGMA	Local Government Management Agency
MABS	Money Advice and Budgeting Service
MASP	Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan
MD	Municipal District
MEP	Member of European Parliament
MU	Maynooth University
NPF	National Planning Framework
NPM	New Public Management
NTA	National Transport Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OPR	Office of the Planning Regulator
ORIS	Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme

PPN	Public Participation Network
RA	Regional Assembly
REA	Relevant External Actor
Rep.	Representative
RRDF	Rural Regional Development Fund
RSES	Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SHD	Strategic Housing Development
SHE	See Her Elected
SPC	Strategic Policy Committee
TII	Transport Infrastructure Ireland
TD	Teachta Dála (member of the Irish Parliament)
UK	United Kingdom
UNSDGs	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
VR	Virtual Reality

AILG President's Foreword

It is with great pleasure and anticipation that I introduce the AILG commissioned research report titled "The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government." This collaborative endeavour between the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) and Maynooth University marks a significant milestone in our ongoing commitment to understanding and adapting to the dynamic landscape of local government in Ireland.

As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, the role of councillors in shaping the future of our communities has become increasingly vital. This report serves as a comprehensive exploration into the challenges, opportunities, and evolving responsibilities faced by our local public representatives. It is a testament to both AILG and Maynooth Universities shared dedication to fostering effective, responsive, and forward-thinking local governance.

The research, encapsulated within these pages, is not merely an academic exercise; it is a reflection of our commitment to enhancing the capabilities of those who play a pivotal role in local decision-making. By examining the contemporary issues and trends influencing the work of councillors, we aim to equip our members with the knowledge and insights necessary to excel in their roles now and into the future.

I extend my gratitude to the researchers and academics from Maynooth University and its research centre, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), who have dedicated their time and expertise to this project for the past two years. Their commitment to excellence has undoubtedly enriched our understanding of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for councillors in Irish local government. I would also like to extend a sincere thanks to the independent steering group who played a crucial role in guiding and overseeing the



development and implementation of the research report. Their diverse experience and expertise has been crucial in maintaining the quality and integrity of the research.

To our members, stakeholders, and the wider community, I encourage you to delve into the findings presented within this report. Let it serve as a guide, an inspiration, and a catalyst for informed discussions that will shape the future of local government in Ireland, with our elected council at its core.

“

It is my hope that this research report inspires collective action and helps to serve as a catalyst for positive change to help build a resilient and visionary foundation for the 21st-century councillor”

Gail Dunne

Councillor Gail Dunne
AILG President 2023/2024

Executive Summary

The aim of the research is to document the roles played by the elected members of Ireland's thirty-one local authorities. It also seeks to record councillors' perspectives and experiences of their roles, and it examines ways in which they can be supported in exercising their roles. The research has sought to capture and articulate councillors' voices, thereby adding value to previous studies about local government.

This research report was informed by an extensive review of international literature, and it is noteworthy that Ireland did not feature much in cross-country studies about the role of the councillor in local government. Thus, this research addresses a significant gap, as it has generated a considerable volume of primary data about councillors' experiences in Ireland. Furthermore, the research has ensured that the councillors' voice was to the fore, and the methods of primary data collection were as follows: an online questionnaire (which was circulated to all 949 councillors); one-to-one interviews with stratified samples of councillors; and thematic focus groups (roundtable discussions) with councillors. Five hundred councillors completed the questionnaire, and fifty-three participated in interviews or focus groups; thereby ensuring this report has a very strong evidence base. These engagements with councillors were complemented by interviews with other senior stakeholders who interface with local government.

Previous work by AILG and the literature review (undertaken by the Maynooth University / ICLRD Research Team) informed a distillation of the main themes and issues on which this research focuses. These include the following: councillors' perceptions of their roles; interfaces within the politic; perceptions and understandings of councillors; job satisfaction and challenges; recruitment and retention; remuneration; power bases; gender; diversity; perceptions and implications of local government reforms; possible

innovations; and continuing professional development. The questionnaire findings show that councillors perceive themselves as advocates, problem-solvers, fixers, information conduits and civic leaders, among many other roles. They note, however, that their roles have been changing over recent years and that these continue to change rapidly. Most councillors enjoy their work, and they contend that their representative roles enable them to better perform their statutory / legislative roles.

While councillors find their work rewarding, they find particular issues challenging. Housing is to the fore in this regard, and many councillors expressed considerable frustration with supply, quality, resource, policy and systemic deficits in housing. Indeed, several reported that they face public ire and scorn due to housing-related challenges. Councillors frequently experience intrusions into their personal and family time, and they are continually either attending events and meetings, or they are 'on call'. Councillors also reported challenges associated with a lack of decision-making powers and responsibilities in policy domains that they perceive to be important to the communities they represent. There is a strong sense, among councillors, that they are losing power, and that Ireland has been on a centralisation trajectory that has not been good for local democracy.

Councillors report that many citizens and some officials do not understand or appreciate their roles, and these misunderstandings can be associated with the changing nature of the roles councillors perform and the evolving governance landscape in Ireland. Thus, councillors would like to see more awareness-raising of their work and the significance of local government and local democracy. Most councillors use social media to communicate with their constituents, but social media is a double-edge sword, as councillors are often subject to on-line abuse and hostility.

Female councillors are more likely (than their male counterparts) to be on the receiving end of abuse (not just online) in the course of their work. Indeed, the online questionnaire unearths evidence that good employment practices do not fully or properly pertain in many councillors' working environments.

Councillors recognise the need for more diversity in their council chambers, and there is broad support for the provision of maternity and paternity leave, but opinions are mixed in respect of gender quotas. They note that time (or lack thereof) and councillors' growing workloads (while not having increased powers) are significant barriers to the exercise of their roles and to the recruitment and retention of councillors. While welcoming the increased remuneration that has been provided in recent years, they note that they continue to receive part-time pay for a full-time job.

While most councillors are members of political parties, and they interface regularly with Oireachtas members, there is little enthusiasm among them for the reforms and reconfigurations of local government that have taken place over the past two decades, and in particular for the *2014 Local Government (Reform) Act*. Most councillors continue to oppose the abolition of Town Councils and the formation of State-level authorities / agencies, such as Uisce Éireann. There is, however, a broad welcome for the establishment of municipal districts / local electoral areas (MDs/ LEAs), and many councillors would like to see more decision-making competencies being devolved to that level. They are also supportive of further cross-border and inter-jurisdictional collaboration among local authorities.

Councillors are generally keen to see Ireland's local government system become more like that of other EU member states – with real and tangible decentralisation of competencies from the national

to the local level.

They note scope for the transfer of powers in respect of housing, policing, traffic management and transport, among other functional remits. While most councillors support directly elected mayors, they emphasise that mayors' powers should not usurp those of other councillors. The questionnaire findings confirm that councillors are performing multiple representative and legislative roles, and they see these sets of roles as being mutually re-enforcing. They also believe that their representative roles have been under-recorded and under-valued, and they would like to see these deficits being redressed.

Councillors' roles are complex, multi-faceted and changing, and councillors note the importance of continuing professional development. Their recommendations in this regard will inform AILG's training and development work programme over the coming years. Councillors' experiences and recommendations also point to the importance of raising awareness of, and valuing, the roles they perform, consolidating functions and responsibilities at MD / LEA level, taking additional steps to ensure dignity at work, and ensuring councillors are provided with more supports to enable them to deal with the technical aspects of their roles.

Achoimire Feidhmeach

Choimisiúnaigh Cumann Rialtas Áitiúil na hÉireann (AILG) an taighde seo ar ról an chomhairleora san aonú haois is fiche. Rinne Ollscoil Mhá Nuad an taighde seo go neamhspleách trína hionad taighde, an Lárionad Idirnáisiúnta um Fhorbairt Áitiúil agus Réigiúnach (ICLRD).

Is é aidhm an taighde na ról a imríonn comhaltaí tofa na n-údarás áitiúil in Éirinn a chur i laoi agus i litir. Lena chois sin, déanann sé iarracht dearcthaí agus taithí na gcomhairleoirí ar a ról a thaifeadadh, agus scrúdaíonn sé bealaí inar féidir tacú leo agus iad ag feidhmiú a ról. Tá iarracht déanta ag an taighde glórtha na gcomhairleoirí a ghabháil agus a chur in iúl, agus ar an gcaoi sin ag cur luach le staidéir a rinneadh roimhe seo ar rialtas áitiúil.

Bhí an tuarascáil taighde seo bunaithe ar athbhreithniú fairsing ar litríocht idirnáisiúnta, agus is fiú a thabhairt faoi deara nach raibh mórán suntais d'Éirinn i staidéir tras-tíre ar ról an chomhairleora sa rialtas áitiúil go dtí seo. Mar sin féin, tugann an taighde seo aghaidh ar bhearna shuntasach, toisc gur ghin sé méid suntasach fianaise dhostéanta faoi thaithí na gcomhairleoirí in Éirinn. Ar a bharr sin, chinntigh an taighde go raibh guth na gcomhairleoirí chun tosaigh agus bhí na modhanna bailithe sonraí príomhúla mar seo a leanas: ceistneoir ar líne (a scaipeadh ar gach ceann de na 949 comhairleoir); agallaimh duine le duine le samplaí srathaithe de chomhairleoirí; agus fócasghrúpaí téamacha (chomhchainteanna) le comhairleoirí. Chomhlánaigh cúig chéad comhairleoir an ceistneoir, agus ghlac caoga trí páirt in agallaimh nó grúpaí fócais; cintíonn sé seo go bhfuil bonn fianaise an-láidir ag an tuarascáil seo. Comhlánaíodh na hidirghníomhaíochtaí seo le comhairleoirí ag agallaimh le páirtithe leasmhara sinsearach eile a dhéanann idirghníomhú le rialtas áitiúil.

Chuir obair a rinne AILG roimhe seo agus an t-athbhreithniú litríochta (arna déanamh ag Ollscoil Mhá Nuad / Foireann Taidghe ICLRD) eolas ar fáil do dhriogadh na bpríomhthéamaí agus na saincheisteanna ar a ndíríonn an taighde seo. Ina measc tá dearcadh na gcomhairleoirí ar a ról; idirghníomhaíochtaí laistigh den chóras rialtais áitiúil agus leis an gcomhlacht polaitiúil níos leithne; tuairimí agus tuiscintí na gcomhairleoirí; sásamh poist agus dúshláin; earcaíocht agus coiméad; luach saothair; bunanna cumhachta; inscne; éagsúlacht; tuairimí agus impleachtaí athchóirithe rialtais áitiúil; nuálaíochtaí féideartha; agus forbairt ghairmiúil leanúnach. Léiríonn torthaí an tsuirbhé go mbreathnaíonn comhairleoirí orthu féin mar abhcóidí, mar réititheoirí fadhbanna, mar dheisitheoirí, mar sheoltóirí faisnéise agus mar cheannairí sibhialta, i measc go leor ról eile. Mar sin féin, tugann siad faoi deara go bhfuil a ról ag athrú le blianta beaga anuas agus go leanann siad ag athrú go tapa. Baineann formhór na gcomhairleoirí taitneamh as a gcuid oibre agus maíonn siad go gcuireann a ról ionadaíochta ar a gcumas a ról reachtúla / reachtaíochta a chomhlíonadh níos fearr.

Cé go measann comhairleoirí go bhfuil a gcuid oibre sásúil, bíonn fadhbanna ar leith ag baint leo. Tá tithíocht chun tosaigh maidir leis seo, agus chuir go leor comhairleoirí an-fhuistrachas in iúl maidir le soláthar, cáilíocht, acmhainní, polasaí agus easnaimh chórasacha sa tithíocht. Ar ndóigh, thuairiscigh roinnt daoine go bhfuil fearg agus dímhéas roimh an bpobal orthu mar gheall ar dhúshláin a bhaineann le tithíocht. Is minic a chailleann comhairleoirí a gcuid ama pearsanta agus teaghlach, bíonn siad ag freastal go leanúnach ar imeachtaí agus cruinnithe nó bíonn siad 'ar glao-dhualgas'. Ina theannta sin, thuairiscigh comhairleoirí dúshláin a bhain le heaspa cumhachtaí agus freagrachtaí cinnteoireachta i réimsí polasaí a mheasann siad a bheith tábhachtach do na pobail a ndéanann siad ionadaíocht dóibh. Tá braistint láidir i measc na gcomhairleoirí go bhfuil cumhacht á chailleadh

acu agus go bhfuil Éire ar chonair lárnaithe nach gcuireann an daonlathas áitiúil chun cinn.

Tuairiscíonn comhairleoirí nach dtuigeann nó nach measann go leor saoránach agus roinnt oifigeach a ról, d'fhéadfadh baint a bheith ag na míthuiscintí seo le nádúr athraitheach na ról a chomhlíonann comhairleoirí agus leis an tírdhreach rialachais atá ag athrú in Éirinn. Dá bhrí sin, ba mhaith le comhairleoirí níos mó feasachta a fheiceáil ar a gcuid oibre agus ar thábhacht an rialtais áitiúil agus an daonlathais áitiúil.

Úsáideann an chuid is mó de chomhairleoirí na meáin shóisialta chun cumarsáid a dhéanamh lena dtoghthóirí, ach tá míbhuntáistí ag baint leis na meáin shóisialta freisin mar is minic a bhíonn mí-úsáid agus naimhdeas ar líne ag comhairleoirí. Is dóichí go mbeidh comhairleoirí bainearna (ná a gcomhghleacaithe fireanna) ag fáil mí-úsáide (ní hamháin ar líne) le linn a gcuid oibre. Gan amhras, tugann an suirbhé ar líne le fios nach mbaineann dea-chleachtais fostaíochta ar fad nó go cuí i dtimpeallachtaí oibre go leor comhairleoirí.

Aithníonn comhairleoirí go bhfuil gá le níos mó éagsúlachta ina seomraí comhairle agus tá tacaíocht leathan ann do sholáthar saoire mháithreachais agus atharthachta, ach tá tuairimí measctha ann maidir le cuótaí inscne. D'aibhsigh siad gur bacainní suntasacha iad ar fheidhmiú a ról agus ar chomhairleoirí a earcú agus a choinneáil, agus chuir siad in iúl gur bacainní suntasacha iad am (nó easpa ama) agus ualaí oibre méadaitheach na gcomhairleoirí (cé nach bhfuil cumhachtaí méadaithe acu). Cé go bhfáiltíonn siad roimh an luach saothair méadaithe atá curtha ar fáil le blianta beaga anuas, cuireann siad in iúl go leanann siad ag fáil pá páirtaimseartha as post lánaimseartha.

Cé gur baill de pháirtithe polaitíochta iad tromlach na gcomhairleoirí, agus go ndéanann siad idirghníomhú go rialta le comhaltaí an Oireachtais, níl mórán díograise ina measc maidir leis na hathchóirithe agus na hathchumraithe ar rialtas áitiúil atá déanta le fiche bliain anuas, agus go háirithe don Acht Rialtais Áitiúil (Leasú) 2014. Leanann an chuid is mó de chomhairleoirí ag cur i gcoinne deireadh a chur le Comhairlí Baile agus bunú údarás / gníomhaireachtaí ar leibhéal an Stáit, mar Uisce Éireann. Mar sin féin, fáiltítear go forleathan roimh bhunú ceantair bhardasacha/ toghcheantair áitiúla agus ba mhaith le go leor

forleathan roimh bhunú ceantair bhardasacha/ toghcheantair áitiúla agus ba mhaith le go leor comhairleoirí go ndéanfaí níos mó inniúlachtaí cinnteoireachta a chineadh chuig an leibhéal sin. Lena chois sin, tacaíonn siad le tuilleadh comhoibrithe trasteorann agus idir-dhlínse i measc na n-údarás áitiúil.

De ghnáth bíonn fonn ar chomhairleoirí córas rialtais áitiúil na hÉireann a fheiceáil ag éirí níos cosúla le córas ballstáit eile an AE – le dílárú fíor agus inláimhsithe inniúlachtaí ón leibhéal náisiúnta go dtí an leibhéal áitiúil. Tugann siad dá n-aire go bhfuil scóip ann chun cumhachtaí a aistriú maidir le tithíocht, póilíneacht, bainistiú tráchta agus iompar, i measc sainchúraimí feidhmiúla eile. Cé go dtacaíonn formhór na gcomhairleoirí le méaraí a thoghtar go díreach, leagann siad béim nár cheart go nglacfadh cumhachtaí na méaraí ionad chumhachtaí comhairleoirí eile.

Deimhníonn torthaí an taighde seo go bhfuil ról ionadaíochta agus reachtacha iolracha á gcomhlíonadh ag comhairleoirí, agus measann siad go bhfuil na ról seo ag treisiú a chéile. Ina theannta sin, creideann siad go bhfuil a ról ionadaíochta tearc-thaifeadta agus tearc-luacháilte agus ba mhaith leo go ndéanfaí na heasnaimh sin a cheartú.

Tá ról na gcomhairleoirí casta, ilghnéitheach agus athraitheach agus tugann comhairleoirí faoi deara an tábhacht a bhaineann le leanúint lena bhforbairt ghairmiúil. Beidh a gcuid moltaí ina leith seo mar bhonn eolais do chlár oibre oiliúna agus forbartha AILG sna blianta amach romhainn. Ina theannta sin, léiríonn eispéiris agus moltaí na gcomhairleoirí an tábhacht a bhaineann le feasacht a mhúscailt ar na ról a chomhlíonann siad, agus luach a chur orthu, ag comhdhlúthú feidhmeanna agus freagrachtaí ag leibhéal MD / LEA agus céimeanna breise a ghlacadh chun dínit san obair a dheimhniú agus a chinntiú go gcuirtear tuilleadh tacaíochtaí ar fáil do chomhairleoirí le cur ar a gcumas déileáil le gnéithe teicniúla a ról.

SECTION 1:

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Chapter 1: Introduction

The functions of local government in the Republic of Ireland (heretofore referred to as 'Ireland') are mostly exercised by thirty-one local authoritiesⁱ, with local elected councillors playing key roles. There have been notable changes in Irish local government since the system was awarded constitutional recognition in 1999; with today's local government structure coming into effect under the provisions of the *Local Government (Reform) Act 2014*. The following are among the changes directly affecting the work and roles of elected members:

- The reconfiguration of some executive and reserved functions;
- The enactment of planning (and development) legislation that defines councillors' roles in the planning process;
- The ending of the so-called dual mandate (excluding Oireachtas members and MEPs from local government);
- The growth (in number and range) of participative democracy structures;
- The reduction in the number of councillors (mainly associated with the abolition of town councils);
- The establishment of municipal districts; and
- The amalgamations of some local authorities.

These are substantial reforms, and structural changes introduced in 1991 and 2014 have had significant impacts on the work of elected members. Thus, councillors' roles have been changing and evolving at an increased pace over recent years. The role of the councillor in the

21st Century involves much more than statutory functions. Councillors are now viewed as advocates for change, place-makers and place-based leaders; requiring expertise in climate change, multi-modal mobility, and town centre regeneration to name but a few key priority policy areas. This research, commissioned by the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG), involved an extensive engagement with councillors to reflect on, and garner, their experiences of what it means to be an elected official and to consider how the role is evolving and the skillsets / tools they require to optimise their roles in contemporary local government.

The AILG and the reports' authors are cognisant of the fact that the local government landscape is a dynamic space, and that some policy and practice changes occurred while this research was being conducted. These include, *inter alia*, the enactment of legislation to provide for maternity leave for councillors, the publication of the report on the Dublin Citizens' Assembly, and the legislative progress of the *Local Government (Mayor of Limerick) Bill 2023*. More recently, there has been the launch of the Seanad Public Consultation on the Future of Local Democracy, due to report in early 2024, and the third monitoring visit of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Monitoring Committee); the report and recommendations of which was ratified by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CLRAE) of Europe in October 2023.

1.1. Purpose of this Report

The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) is the primary body representing elected councillors and serves as a networking, policy-development and training resource for them. In 2021, AILG entered into a strategic partnership, with Maynooth University (MU), primarily focusing on policy development and awareness, professional education and capacity building. As part of this strategic partnership, it was agreed that a research study should be undertaken to consider how the role of the elected official was changing. Furthermore, it was envisaged that the research would identify councillors' needs, from which a programme of supports would be developed.

The strategic partnership recognises MU's role as a civic university, committed to engaging (a) in learning beyond the University's campus; (b) in discovery which is mutually beneficial beyond the academic community; and (c) in enhanced service delivery that directly benefits the wider public – regionally and nationally. As a civic university, MU is committed to working with a diverse range of stakeholders on an inter-disciplinary basis, to promote the development of sustainable local and regional economies. It respects the strategic role many organisations play in the development of 'place' and the responsibility this brings to bear. Maynooth University and its research centres, such as the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), are committed to not only the development of place-making and place-based leadership but to working together with the public, private, and community sectors to address multi-scalar challenges, nurture innovation and contribute to the public good. These roles are particularly relevant as many of today's global challenges – the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, changing demographics and public health pressures – require local and evidence-based responses.

Targeting all 949 councillors in Ireland, the core objectives of this research, as jointly defined by the AILG, MU and ICLRD, are:

- To provide, from a councillor perspective, a stocktake of the changing context of the role of the elected official; and the range of challenges and opportunities currently impacting and shaping the role;

- To assess the impacts of the *2014 Local Government (Reform) Act* in terms of the resulting reforms and structural and operational changes, particularly as they affected the role of the councillor;
- To give voice to councillors and to bring their insights to bear on local government research;
- To consider how the evolving international, European and national policy agenda is impacting on the workload of the councillor;
- Taking account of current and potential roles, to ascertain what additional tools / skills-sets are required by councillors to enable them to continue to deliver effectively for their constituents; and
- To generate Ireland-specific material, thereby complementing international literature and studies (in other jurisdictions) on local government.

Critical to the delivery of this research programme was giving voice to councillors regarding the effectiveness of current systems and modes of operation and to make recommendations for their enhancement. This research will add value to the Moorhead Report (2018), which noted in its' foreword a "fervent wish...that this report will be used to initiate a discussion of the role of the Councillor in Irish Society".

For further details on the MU / ICLRD Research Team, see Appendix A.

1.2. The Changing Role of the Councillor

The importance of local government and of the multiple roles of councillors are increasingly recognised. The role of the elected official in the 21st Century is associated with much more than its statutory function; councillors are increasingly viewed as stewards of place, advocates for change, place-makers, entrepreneurs and place-based leaders (Mangan *et al*, 2016; Hambleton, 2015). This recognition is not always accompanied by commensurate actions to ensure that councillors are effectively supported or fully enabled to perform the functions envisioned in the *European Charter of Local Self-Government* and / or in the legislative frameworks and political cultures that

pertain across most of Europe. Studies here in Ireland, as elsewhere, point to the need for, and merits of, direct councillor participation in research that seeks to investigate, understand and promote the ability of councillors to provide civic leadership, devise public policy, oversee and enable service delivery and engender democratic participation and engagement, among other functions.

1.3. Methodology

In undertaking this research on the theme of *The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government*, Maynooth University and its research centre ICLRD employed a mixed-methods approach to the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. As this research focuses on the role of the elected official, it was critical from the outset that the councillor's voice, experiences and attitudes were captured at every stage. Previous studies illustrate the merits of involving councillors in research about local government; their participation ensures that their insights and perspectives are brought to bear on our understanding of local government and how systems can be continuously enhanced. Studies carried out across other countries point to the usefulness of comparative analysis, and to that end, the research questions posed in a recent UK (University of Birmingham) study (Mangan *et al.*, 2016) provided useful signposts and benchmarks for a study in Irelandⁱⁱ.

The University of Birmingham's research considers a range of contextual issues that are reshaping local government; it examines the roles that councillors are playing, or recognise that they will need to be playing, within their councils and localities, and it explores a number of challenges – all of which are pertinent to contemporary local government in Ireland. These questions centre on the following:

- i How can councillors be supported to operate effectively in the challenging economic context in which they are working?
- ii How do we create a shared understanding of councillors' roles, and nurture and support people to play them?
- iii How can councillors create citizen engagement approaches that foster a culture of working together to co-design solutions to issues?
- iv Are councillors and officers having

conversations about how they can best work together?

- v How can councillors be supported to understand and engage with the combined authorities' agendaⁱⁱⁱ – both their own contribution to it, and citizens' engagement with it?

- vi How can local government create a culture / narrative which encourages people from a diverse range of backgrounds to consider standing for election and, if elected, be supported as public representatives and be willing to stand again?

What approaches to development and support can be created to enable councillors to develop the skills of a 21st century councillor?

- vii

The MU / ICLRD research team employed a three-strand methodology for this study; the core elements being:

1. **Strand 1:** Online questionnaire administered to all 949 local elected officials covering five key areas. Five hundred (n=500) responses were received to this online questionnaire over the period April to November 2022, representing a 53% response rate. The questionnaire was administered using Jisc Online Surveys (MU Licence), and it included a mix of questions that were specific to the Irish context and were framed around a number of key headings, namely:
 - The Role of Councillors;
 - Challenges facing Councillors;
 - Implications of Reforms and Reconfigurations;
 - Possible Innovations; and
 - Tools and Skills;
2. **Strand 2:** One-to-one interviews and focus groups, based on a sampling frame agreed with AILG, and which enabled the research team to explore issues emerging from the online questionnaire in greater depth. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the sampling frame employed; and
3. **Strand 3:** Compilation of the final report, *The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government*.

Table 1.1: The Sampling Frame for Interviews and Focus Groups with Councillors**QUESTIONNAIRE**

Platform	Timeframe	Engagement	Response
Online	April-November 2022	All Councillors - 949	500 (53%)

INTERVIEWS

Platform	Timeframe	Cohorts	Numbers Engaged
Online & Face to Face	May-November 2022	Geographical - Northern & Western	10
		Geographical - Eastern & Midlands	10
		Geographical - Southern	10
		Former TDs, now serving councillors	3
		Long Service (40+yrs) *	1
		Premature Exits	3
		Young Councillors (<30yrs)	3

FOCUS GROUPS

Platform	Timeframe	Cohorts	Numbers Engaged
Online	September-November 2022	Ethnic Minorities	5
		Female Councillors	6
		First Time Councillors **	2

Notes:

* Also captured in Councillors/Formers TDs and Geographic Samples

** Also captured in face-to-face interviews - Geographic Samples and Young Councillors

(Source: Authors)

In addition to the councillor cohorts, as outlined in the sampling frame (Table 1.1), the researchers also held one-to-one meetings and a focus group with relevant external actors. Six stakeholders participated.

Further details on the methodology can be found in Appendix B.

1.3.1. Project Oversight

To support the AILG and research team in meeting the core objectives of this research programme, a Project Steering Group was established to oversee, guide and promote the work. This is standard operational procedure by ICLRD for all its national-scale action research programmes. The main roles of the Project Steering Group were:

- Provide the researchers with perspectives and feedback on the most relevant issues, indicators and benchmarks;
- Encourage councillor / local government support for the research, and ensure maximum response levels from among the questionnaire population;
- Provide feedback on emerging findings and draft reports;
- Promote the research externally; and
- Advise (and work with relevant) stakeholders, as appropriate, to implement recommendations that emerge (see Appendix C).

The membership of the Project Steering Group is outlined in Appendix C.

Chapter 2: The Changing Role of the Councillor - An International Lens

Key Messaging

It is evident from this cursory overview of the literature that:

- Councillors perform multiple and valuable roles that transcend statutory and representative functions.
- Councillors' roles have changed considerably over the past two decades, and in many respects, elements of the local government system have not kept pace with the changes affecting councillors.
- The pace of change and the complexities associated with councillors' milieu and roles oblige them to be skilled and competent in exercising both statutory and representative roles, and investment in professional development supports (including the type provided by the AILG) is necessary and valuable in these regards.
- Councillors' abilities to operate effectively are shaped, *inter alia*, by organisational culture – in local authorities, political parties and in the institutions and organisations with which they interface. They have also been affected by institutional changes over the past decade, including the proliferation of new governance structures, austerity policies and reconfigurations of local government's geographies, roles and responsibilities.
- Councillors perceive a diminution of their roles and powers, particularly vis-à-vis those of local authority senior executives.
- Councillor engagement in research about local government is beneficial but also essential – both in terms of developing their capacity and ensuring their voices are heard more frequently.
- Whilst there is a significant gap in relation to Irish data, there are several international studies from which this research can draw, and against which work in Ireland can be benchmarked.

Across all jurisdictions in western democracies, there is a recognition that councillors play multiple roles as legislators, public representatives, civic leaders and as conduits between the local, regional and national tiers of government. Their statutory roles and responsibilities are defined in, and prescribed by, legislation, while their representative roles and responsibilities can be more nebulous and fluid. Representative roles include, and are not limited to, the following: advocating on behalf of citizens; advocating and speaking on behalf of

communities; participating in community activities and organisations; supporting grassroots activities; interfacing with special interests; leading and / or coordinating area-based or sectoral initiatives. As Klok and Denters (2013) note, councillors have to make sure local government (the executive and administration) act in accordance with citizens' preferences. They ensure the accountability of the executive leadership and its administrative apparatus, and they perform an intermediary role between citizens and the executive.

Councillors are, therefore, an important and integral component of systems of sub-national governance, although they are often overshadowed by the elected members of higher-tier institutions, and, in some cases, by unelected officials. A review of the literature universally notes that the roles performed by councillors have become increasingly complex, and that there are systemic shortcomings across many systems in respect of understanding and responding to new and emerging complexities. In most jurisdictions, complexities and demands are associated with the devolution of decision-making powers from central to regional and local authorities and with the emergence and consolidation of forms of multi-level governance. Complexities are also associated with austerity policies, over the past fifteen years, and with the resultant pressures on local authorities to sustain and deliver services in the face of reduced budgets and revised modes of performance appraisal.

The international literature includes several inter-country comparative studies, but with scant reference to Ireland. These are useful in providing benchmarks for the formulation of research questions and as references for comparative analysis. Studies note the need for more research in this field and the importance of enabling councillors' voices to come through in academic and applied research.

2.1. The Importance of Councillors and the Roles they Play

The roles – actual and perceived – held and performed by councillors have changed over time, and they are likely to change further over the coming years. The emergence and initial consolidation of local government institutions, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, are associated with councillors exercising fiduciary duties as 'guardians of the rate payers'. Subsequently, the extension of the franchise to non-property holders and the expansion of welfare states in the post-war period brought local government more firmly into the role of public service delivery. In this context, councillors were "immersed in activities related to public service provision" (Copus *et al.*, 2013: 389). Councils continue to be important vehicles for the delivery of public services and the disbursement of resources, but, in addition to these functions, they have consistently had a role in enabling local democracy and assembling civic

actors at the local level. These functions imply that "councillors are supposed to personalise this political primacy based on the prevalence of the 'layman rule'" (Verhelst *et al.*, 2011: 104), and that as local leaders they "must lead, in a broad sense, their communities, their municipality as a bureaucratic organisation and – where appropriate – their political parties, or if independent of a party must provide leadership to non-partisan political organisations" (Copus and Steyvers, 2017: 9). A recent report on the role of councillors in Ireland notes,

“Local authorities also play an important representational role in that they represent the needs of the electorate. As democratically elected and accountable bodies they have the authority and legitimacy to speak and act on behalf of their communities. The elected council thus acts as a democratic forum for the representation and articulation of local interests and can provide civic leadership (Moorhead, 2018: 3) ”

Councillors' roles in respect of public service delivery confer responsibilities on them which fuse with their mandates as elected public representatives. Effective service delivery involves, *inter alia*, enacting legislation (e.g., by-laws) – legislative role; this includes ensuring effective local-level application of national policy objectives – negotiation and intermediary roles; and overseeing the corporate governance of the authorities to which they are elected – oversight roles (Sörensen and Torfing, 2009). Studies note the multiple and changing roles which councillors perform. Interviews with members of Manchester City Council, in the 1960s, led Hecló to observe, "the city councillor is in fact not one but three men: committee member, constituency representative and party activist" (cited in Freeman, 2020: 565). While councillors can bring valuable local knowledge and insights to bear on decision-

making processes and the resolution of contested issues, they can tend to play to local vested interests and give these precedence over attaining the common good. In her analysis of councillors' tendencies to concentrate on local knowledge and to distrust outside expertise, Kambites (2010: 877) concludes that,

“

An increase in the powers and profile of local councils could improve their relations with other levels of government – both because they would be taken more seriously and because they would no longer feel the same need to justify their role by denigrating principal authorities.”

In giving effect to their roles as enablers of local democracy, councillors establish a link between citizen and politics (Heywood, 2002; Barnett *et al.*, 2019). While this linking role is celebrated, as evidenced by the status afforded to mayors in jurisdictions such as France, Spain and Switzerland (all of which have different territorial arrangements in respect of sub-national governance), councillors' association with 'the local' can lead to them being stereotyped and portrayed as 'behind the times' or parochial (Barnett *et al.*, 2019).

The *Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments*, commonly known as the Mahon Tribunal^{iv} (after the name of its last chairman), unearthed damaging irregularities, on the parts of some councillors and national politicians, in relation to planning and the zoning of lands in the Greater Dublin Area. While these irregularities were limited to a particular period and to certain individuals, they have had significant impacts on many communities. Moreover, the prolonged and often drip-feed way in which information about malpractices emerged and the costs associated with Mahon and other tribunals damaged public perceptions of councillors, the local government system and the wider body politic. Transparency International Ireland reported that “the findings of the Mahon Tribunal into planning and local government, as well as the RTÉ Investigates exposé on ethics in local councils in 2015, pointed to significant shortcomings in local government's

anti-corruption controls and integrity systems” (McCarthy, 2018: 4). As a consequence, extensive legislative and institutional changes have been introduced that have reduced councillors' influence over planning and have obliged local authorities to introduce more stringent ethical and governance procedures^v.

In the Irish context, the *Local Government Act 2001* (extensively amended and updated by the *Local Government (Reform) Act 2014*) is the core legislative code supporting the structures, powers, functions and duties of local government in Ireland. Irish legislation classifies local authorities' roles and responsibilities into two main areas namely reserved functions (performed by councillors) and executive functions (performed by the chief executive and his / her staff). Reserved functions include adoption of the city/county development plan, agreeing the annual budget, housing policy decisions and environmental policy. Policy decisions are made by majority resolutions, passed by the elected councillor, during council meetings, and these can take place at two levels i.e. full council and / or municipal, metropolitan, borough district and area committee level (depending on the local authority).

2.2. Emerging Complexities and Trends in Local Governance

2.2.1. Austerity and local government

Over the past ten years, austerity policies, in several European jurisdictions, have had multiple adverse effects on the capacity of public bodies, including local authorities, to fully execute their functions, meet citizen expectations and stimulate new opportunities for development (Gray and Barford, 2018; Eckersley and Tobin, 2019; Lippi and Tsekos, 2019). Copus and Steyvers (2017) assert that in the 'austerity era' central governments have used a range of techniques to shape and control local coercive, and conceptual” (2017: 5), and their study notes that councillors can learn from the experiences of others, in their system and beyond, in terms of dealing with the effects of austerity policies and central government's interfaces with local government.

In Ireland, sub-national government is responsible for nine percent of all public expenditure. This is the second-lowest rate in the EU (after Greece),

and across the EU as a whole sub-national authorities are responsible for over a third (34.5%) of public expenditure (OECD, 2023). While the introduction of the local property tax (in 2014) give local authorities a revenue-raising function, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) note that the amount raised through this channel represents less than one percent of the total tax take in Ireland (Kakoulidou and Roantree, 2021). Additionally, Ireland's local authorities were disproportionately affected by financial cutbacks (during the decade 2008-2018), relative to other arms of government (Quinn, 2015; Lehane, 2018; Turley *et al.*, 2018). A number of studies have been conducted that examine the impacts of austerity policies on local government in the UK and in Southern Europe (Turner, 2019; Lippi and Tsekos, 2019), and these provide useful comparators in order to investigate the Irish experience over the past decade and its implications for the current and future roles played by councillors.

2.2.2. Tensions between representative and technical functions

Local government reforms, in several democracies – including in Ireland – have focused on output-based legitimacy, emphasising the performance of democratic institutions as promoted by new public management (NPM). NPM has involved inducing local authorities, among other public bodies, to shed their service delivery operations – through contracting-out, public-private partnerships and privatisation (e.g., in the case of local authorities, waste collection and road maintenance and construction). Furthermore, NPM has prompted local authorities to leverage the professionalisation of public service managers, and it emphasises results-based management, competition between administrative units and individual performance incentives. In practice, such practices are leading to tensions within the local government system – between those who have technical / executive functions and those who have representative functions (Copus *et al.*, 2013). Cross-country research by Vabo and Aars (2013)^{vi} concludes that European councillors are strongly attached to their traditional representative role and have been reluctant to embrace NPM. They conclude that,

“seemingly local councillors are at pains to stress that local government is essentially an arena for resolving local conflicts. Therefore, interconnectedness with the public is the main resource for those who are elected councillors (2013: 718).”

This study provides an opportunity to explore the extent to which such perspectives and experiences pertain in Ireland. In their questioning of managerialist and neo-liberal tendencies (including NPM) of recent decades, which they contend, have diminished the standing of local government, Copus *et al.*, (2013) argue that elected councillors ought to have a more assertive voice. They assert that “local government provides a framework within which greater variety of policy and political contributions can be made – both representative and participatory in nature” (2013: 393). They caution against councillors being drawn inwards towards “managing the machine that is the council as a service-providing body... [and should instead] concern themselves with... broad strategy and leadership (op. cit.: 395).

In many jurisdictions, local government reforms have led to a greater investing of powers in executives relative to elected members (Steyvers, 2010; Steyvers, 2016). In other instances, councillors who assume executive functions, such as directly elected mayors (DEMs), can dominate decision-making dynamics. As Ireland (at least in Limerick) prepares for the establishment of elected executive roles, it is worth considering experiences – from a councillor's perspective – as well as examining Irish councillors' appetites for any further changes in decision-making processes. Where this may not take the form of a DEM, other mechanisms must be identified through which stronger local self-government can be delivered across all local authorities.

2.2.3. Dealing with multi-level governance

The emergence of multi-level governance and the associated entry into decision-making fora

of non-political actors can present challenges and opportunities for councillors. In some instances, councillors associate the transition from government to governance with losing power to non-political actors (Verhelst *et al.*, 2011; Stănuş, 2016; Geissel and Michels, 2018). In Ireland, multi-actor governance arrangements are reflected in the establishment of Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and Public Participation Networks (PPNs), among other structures^{vii}, in which councillors are expected to engage in collaborative decision making with civil society leaders and representatives from statutory bodies. Parallels exist in most other democracies. Councillors' experiences thereof are variable (Razin and Hazan, 2014), and they are worthy of further investigation.

2.2.4. Complexities and changing roles – research implications

Councillors' roles are increasingly complicated and demanding, and while new challenges have emerged, the range of opportunities open to local authorities is increasing. To govern effectively, councillors must demonstrate a governance capacity, commit to enhancing their leadership skills and seek special information and insights to complement their existing local, general and more specialised knowledge-bases. They must be capable communicators, particularly with local-level civil society and, increasingly, with the media. As council leaders, they must think, act and make strategic decisions – often informed by wider global processes – while still continuing to represent their local areas and communities, and act in the best interests of their Council. These diverse audiences are not always easy 'bed fellows'.

In Ireland, councillors are elected at the municipal district (MD), area committee (in Dublin) or local electoral area (LEA) level, and while the sub-county (local electoral area) remains their primary constituency, they are obliged to represent wider city and county interests, as the city / county remains the primary unit of local government. Furthermore, they have the opportunity to sit on higher-tier structures (e.g., regional assemblies). It is essential, therefore, that they have the capacity to promote synergies between these geographical and institutional tiers; in effect, they have to have the capacity to understand and promote both bottom-up and top-down processes (Moorhead, 2018). Research

by Needham and Mangan (2013) of the University of Birmingham, notes that 21st century public servants are often working in 19th century-style organisations where incentives, development opportunities and performance management frameworks do not support the development of new skills, supports and resources that are needed to work in collaborative ways, both across organisations and with citizens. In addition to the statutory requirements of the councillor, there is an increasing array of informal roles and functions to be performed. These, in turn, have their own associated support and development requirements. This research affords an opportunity to explore the range of roles councillors play, the ways in which they interface with citizens, civil society, institutions, higher-tier decision makers and the media and the effects bottom-up and top-down processes have on their work.

2.3. Enhancing Local Democracy and the Role of the Councillor

The *Independent Review of the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members Interim Report* (Moorhead, 2018) refers to various tools and resources that are available to councillors to enable them to exercise their roles – in particular their statutory functions. This review report (2018: 4) states that “strategic policy committees (SPCs) in particular are intended to provide elected members with the opportunity for more in-depth involvement in the development, overview and monitoring of policy”. The final review report on this matter (Moorhead, 2020) recommended a radical overhaul of the way in which councillors are remunerated, although it stated,

“

The ethos of voluntary public service is a long-standing core value of the role of the councillor and publicly accepted part of local elected office. People who put themselves forward to run for public office do so knowing that serving as a local authority elected member involves a significant commitment of time and effort. It is recognised that this commitment grew significantly as a consequence of the 2014 local government reforms (2020: 6). ”

Moorhead's observation that councillors have the authority and legitimacy to speak on behalf of their communities and her description of the council as a democratic forum that provides civic leadership echoes other studies that note the significance of councillors' representative roles. Weeks and Quinlivan (2009: 4) state that "through responding to diverse circumstances, local authorities are often to the forefront of developing innovative solutions and policies that can be adapted for use elsewhere or nationally". They go on to describe local government as a 'laboratory of democracy'. Councillors are very much at the democratic coalface of local government, and in their recommendations on the strengthening of local democracy, Copus *et al.*, (2013) advance a number of proposals as follows:

- Shorter terms of office than the current four years;
- Term limits – preventing the same councillors or parties from controlling local government; and
- Injecting a 'strong dose of direct democracy' into the representative system, with council laws being subject to binding referenda.

Research in several jurisdictions indicates that small-scale municipalities are enabling of engagements and interactions between citizens and councillors (Verhelst *et al.*, 2011). Yet, the tendency in Ireland, as in some other states (e.g., Denmark and the Netherlands) has been towards an upscaling of local authority catchment areas (Klobučnik and Bačik, 2016), although it should be noted that the scale of local authorities in Ireland and the UK remains much larger than is the case across other European democracies (Copus, 2021). While local authority amalgamations can achieve administrative efficiencies (Pevcin, 2014), questions emerge, in the international research, about the implications for democratic accountability, citizen engagement and subsidiarity (Lassen and Serritzlew, 2011; Zeedan, 2017). Chapter 3 (of this report) presents data on the comparative scale of local authorities in OECD countries.

There are a number of initiatives underway in Ireland that seek to support the work of councillors, and, in particular, the interfaces and engagements between them and citizenry. These include, *inter alia*, active citizenship projects promoted by public participation networks (PPNs) and the National

Youth Council. They also include the work of the Women's Manifesto Project^{viii} and *See Her Elected* (SHE) Programme^{ix}, both of which seek to promote women's interest in local government and to encourage more women to stand for election to public office.

2.3.1. Local democracy and gender

The question of gender is particularly relevant in the Irish context. The former mayor of Cork County, Cllr. Mary Linehan-Foley, led a council campaign to promote greater gender equality among councillors. While the 2019 local elections resulted in the highest proportion of female councillors ever elected to Irish local authorities, the figure (24%) is over eight percentage points below the EU average (32.4%). The gender gap in Irish local government is widest in rural counties. While the 2019 local elections saw 48% women being elected in the urban constituency of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, the numbers in Longford were reduced to 5% (i.e. 1 representative), Mayo 6% (2 representatives) and Donegal 11% (4 representatives). This flies in the face of Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which includes a commitment to equal political participation at all levels of government (Berevoescu and Ballington, 2021).

SHE, part of the Longford Women's Link and a joint initiative with 50/50 NorthWest (a voluntary group dedicated to achieving equal representation), is one example of an initiative providing a pathway for women into local government. SHE supports women to be local election candidates and election campaign team members for female candidates^x. While it has developed into a national programme, it retains its strong emphasis on rural Ireland, given the relatively low number of women in rural local authorities (see section 2.4 below, also section 3.3).

In mid-2021, SHE and the ALLG came together to initiate the formation of a **WoMeN's** Regional Caucus, which brings together female councillors from thirteen local authorities in three regions, namely the **West** (Galway City, Galway County, Mayo and Sligo), **Midlands** (Laois, Longford, Offaly, Roscommon and Westmeath) and **North** (Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim and Monaghan). The vision of the **WoMeN's** Regional Caucus is an Ireland in which there is equal representation of women and men on city and county councils and in the

Oireachtas. In addition to the regional caucus, as of April 2023, there are ten women's caucuses in other local authority areas. The caucuses' work has been enabled and supported by AILG and by funding from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

The issue of gender, and indeed diversity, within local government is further elaborated upon in sections 4.2.3 and 4.2.4.

2.4. Councillors' Perceptions and Experiences – Establishing Benchmarks for Ireland

One of the overriding observations, in the literature, is that there are several gaps relating to the main issues affecting councillors, and that their attitudes, perspectives and experiences are frequently overlooked (Razin and Hazan, 2014; Verhelst *et al.*, 2014; Barnett *et al.*, 2019).

While there has been some research on the importance of recruiting councillors / candidates, particularly women and those from ethnic minorities, there has been comparatively little research on retention – enabling / encouraging councillors to remain in public life. In their study of voluntary retirement or 'de-recruitment' in Sweden, Erlingsson and Öhrvall (2011) observe correlations between dropout / de-recruitment (dependent variable) and gender and income (independent variables); women and those on lower incomes are more inclined to vacate their council seats before their term expires. Their research also records that other factors associated with de-recruitment include 'moving from the municipality' and 'conditions in the working life'. Intra-party tensions are also cited as a factor in dropout.

This study, among others (Aars *et al.*, 2012; Hlynsdóttir, 2017; Erlingsson and Wittberg, 2020), brings up issues of accessibility to citizens, remuneration, professionalisation and work-life balance as determinants of councillors' abilities to fulfil their roles. Thus, international literature points to a need for active interventions, including further research, relating to councillors' personal welfare and organisational cultures – in local authorities and in political parties – in order to create more enabling environments

in which individuals, particularly those from under-represented cohorts (e.g. women, ethnic minorities, youth), are willing to participate. These considerations have come into sharp focus over recent years, given the proliferation of social media platforms among local government actors (Silva *et al.*, 2019; Masullo, 2020; Sancino, 2021) and, unfortunately, the online abuse of public representatives, especially females (Fuchs and Schäfer, 2020; Sobieraj *et al.*, 2020; Håkansson, 2021).

Some significant work has already been done, in the Irish context (Moorhead, 2020), on councillor's roles, workloads and remuneration, and it is important to build on that. Although there are a number of inter-country / transnational studies of councillors' experiences of local government, Ireland does not generally feature in them. This poses challenges in terms of transferring and applying lessons from international studies to the Irish context. While Ireland's local government geographies and institutions exhibit Anglo-Saxon characteristics, the predominant political culture is more typical of Southern Europe, in which the notion of 'political localism' prevails. Indeed, the growth of localism in Irish politics derives, in part, from the way in which TDs are elected as much as the way in which local government operates (Spotlight, 2013; Meade and Kiely, 2020).

Thus, while Irish councillors have many shared experiences with their counterparts across Europe, their experiences are also shaped by Ireland's distinctive political geography. Research by Aars *et al.* (2012) suggests that traditional north-south differences across Europe are dissipating, and while their study engaged with almost 12,000 councillors across sixteen European countries, none from Ireland were included. Notwithstanding the declining significance of inter-country differences, research undertaken in the UK indicates that the amount of time invested in council duties and the roles adopted by councillors are affected by the nature of the places they represent; those who represent more deprived areas spend more time on council activities than do those representing more affluent areas (Thrasher *et al.*, 2015). Thus, place and community influence councillors in their work and in the ways in which they interface with other actors, and these merit exploration in the Irish context.

Collecting data from councillors is integral to supporting them to effectively perform the many roles to which they aspire, and which stakeholders expect from them. Greenwood and Wilson (1990) note the importance of training and continuous professional development (CPD) in enabling councillors to keep abreast of changes in local government and their roles therein. The expectation that “elected representatives are expected by voters, the media and experts of various kinds to be able to handle the complexity of political matters in a resourceful manner” (Bladh and Nordvall, 2021) emphasises the importance of education to improve the capacity of elected members. Individual local authorities and representative bodies such as the AILG provide valuable professional development support; with the Association noting that a key task being the establishment of an appropriate pathway for certified training and education that is informed by a detailed training needs assessment. In many jurisdictions, legislation and government guidelines specify the nature of training and CPD. In Sweden, municipalities decide independently, and at the local level, if councillors are to receive an introductory education upon election, and if so, how the training should be designed and implemented (Bladh and Nordvall, 2021). In New South Wales^{xi} the government specifies three strands in respect of councillor training:

- Pre-election candidate sessions – these are to ensure prospective candidates are aware of what will be expected of them if elected (these are not mandatory but are encouraged);
- Induction programme – this aims to equip mayors and councillors with the information they need to perform their role effectively over the first few months, and it has a particular focus on building positive, collaborative relationships between councillors and with staff; and
- Professional development programme – this is to be developed in consultation with all councillors and delivered over the term of the council to build the skills, knowledge and personal attributes necessary to be an effective mayor or councillor.

As Greenwood and Wilson (1990) observe, providers of training need data to inform both the content and format of training, while councillors need to be provided with conducive and enabling conditions. These include, for example, council

support, a positive institutional culture and time. Barnett *et al.* (2019) recommends that in pursuing new avenues of research, studies of local councillors should shift their objects of inquiry towards more problem-driven research, focusing on what they actually do when they engage in political work. They contend that,

“

Capturing such practices would also disclose the possibility of exploring rival visions on the ground, while investigating how these excluded pathways might inform bottom-up reforms of local democracy, rather than top-down attempts at institutional design that are based on pre-existing evaluative commitments (2019: 791). ”

2.5. Summary Remarks

This chapter has identified several of the issues, factors and conditions that shape and influence the many roles councillors perform. It acknowledges the value, to democracy and public service delivery, of councillors’ roles. It notes the significance of power dynamics, governance arrangements, geography / scale, resourcing, remuneration, organisational and political culture and professional development in determining councillors’ abilities to give effect to their statutory and representative roles. The international literature suggests that the local government milieu in which Ireland’s councillors operate is less conducive to the effective exercise of their roles than is the case in other democracies, but as the Irish system is relatively under-studied, it is hard to be definitive in this regard, and there is a compelling case for more research among, and with, councillors here.

Chapter 3: Local Government in Ireland - An Overview

Key Messaging

- Ireland's sub-national government landscape has changed considerably over the past three decades; not least under the *Local Government (Reform) Act 2014*.
- Local government in Ireland is recognised across Europe as having a relatively limited range of functions; with the OECD ranking Ireland lowest of the 27 EU member states in respect of the level of decentralisation.
- Municipal districts, which were introduced under the 2014 Act are more typical, than are counties, of local authority units in most OECD countries. However, while these are statutory entities, they do not have the status or function of local authorities.
- Key roles for councillors include the making of by-laws, the adoption of plans (e.g. county/city development plans, local economic and community plans, local area plans) as they relate to spatial planning and economic development, the setting of development priorities, shaping and adopting specific strategies (e.g. integration, climate adaptation, housing), establishing a local fund for the purposes of supporting community initiatives and making representations to central government.
- The regional tier of government is relatively new in Ireland, the current system of three Regional Assemblies having been established in 2015. Now on a statutory footing, the assemblies are responsible for not only monitoring the financial and administrative performance of the local authorities within their region but also for the development of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies as a delivery mechanism for the National Planning Framework – thus firmly establishing a planning hierarchy from national to regional to local.

This chapter provides a succinct overview of Ireland's local government system, with specific reference to the roles played by elected members. Ireland's sub-national government landscape has changed considerably over the past three decades, and there has arguably been more systemic change since the year 2000 than was the case over the entire twentieth century. Over the past thirty years, Ireland's local government system has been influenced by processes of Europeanisation, such as the formation and reconfiguration of regional structures and increased participation by non-

governmental actors in local decision-making (Rees *et al.*, 2009; Quinn, 2014; Quinn, 2015; Callanan, 2018; Nadin, *et al.*, 2018; Shannon and O'Leary, 2020). During this time, interfaces and relationships between local and central government have changed, and legislation has been introduced, most notably in 2014, that has shaped the environment in which Ireland's councillors currently do their work. In her assessment of changes in Ireland's local government system, Quinn (2015: 22) notes,



While reform of the range of functions has been limited, considerable reform has been achieved in how the functions are implemented. This involved strategic approaches to planning (corporate plans are now obligatory), new modes of service delivery, increased use of technology, employment of specialist personnel, changes in procurement practices and outsourcing of certain services, as well as new consultation, benchmarking and evaluation processes. ”

The implications of these reforms have been the subject of a recent Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe (CLRAE) review of local self-government in Ireland, the first since 2013 and thus the first taking account of the 2014 legislation and associated reforms and restructuring (see section 3.2. for an overview of the findings). In a similar vein, the Seanad Public Consultation Committee has in the past three months held a public consultation on the ‘Future of Local Democracy’, the overall purpose being to consider the impacts of legislative change on the powers of local authorities and on public engagement and participation in the local government process. This growing interest in the future of local government in Ireland reinforces the timeliness of this research commissioned by the AILG.

Ireland is one of eight Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries that has just one tier of sub-national government^{xii}. Most countries have two elected tiers of sub-national government i.e., a regional tier and a local / municipal tier. In Ireland’s case, the regional tier (i.e., regional assemblies) are not directly elected by the citizens but are comprised of representatives from their constituent local authority areas. This chapter provides a brief overview of local and regional government in Ireland.

3.1. Territorial System

3.1.1. Local Government systems

The local / municipal tier, which is directly elected, has thirty-one units as follows:

- 26 county councils,
- 3 city councils, and
- 2 city and county councils.

Up to the enactment of the *Local Government (Reform) Act 2014*, Ireland had 114 local government structures:

- 29 county councils;
- 5 city councils; and
- 80 town councils.

Thus, the 2014 legislation brought about a reduction in the number of local authorities. Tipperary, which had two local authorities (north and south), now has one. The city and county councils in both Waterford and Limerick were amalgamated. The legislation also abolished the eighty town councils; with the principle of subsidiarity now shifting to newly established municipal districts (MDs), which serve as local electoral areas and as fora in which councillors can discuss and pursue district-level issues. In Dublin City and County, there are area committees (ACs), rather than MDs, although they operate in a similar manner. In terms of scale (geographical and population size), MDs and ACs are more typical, than are counties, of local authority geographies in most OECD countries. While these units are statutory entities, they do not have the status of local authorities (Boyle *et al.*, 2020).

The current geographical footprints of Ireland’s local authorities generally align with county boundaries that pre-date the foundation of the division of County Dublin, in 1994, to form three new local authorities i.e. Fingal, South Dublin and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, local authority geographies have remained largely static. Consequently, the territorial system of sub-national government in Ireland has not taken account of population growth, and Ireland has, after South Korea and the UK, the third-largest local authority areas among OECD countries. Table 3.1 presents key data in respect of the scale of local government territories in Ireland and other comparable countries.

Table 3.1: Local authority (lowest tier) units by geographical and population size, in Ireland and selected OECD countries and EU27

	Number of lowest tier authorities	Average size of municipal authority (no. inhabitants)	Median size of municipal authority (no. inhabitants)	Average number of municipalities per 100,000 inhabitants	Average municipal area (km ²)	% of municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants
OECD 38	137,097	10,016	n.a.	10.0	227	25%
EU27	85,900	5,214	14,393	19.2	52	29%
Ireland	31	161,891	139,100	0.6	2,256	0%
Denmark	98	59,753	43,089	1.7	438	2%
Norway	356	15,191	5,180	6.6	908	22%
Slovak Rep.	2,927	1,859	670	53.8	17	84%
Slovenia	212	9,942	4,943	10.1	96	13%

(Adapted from OECD, 2023).

3.1.2. Regional Government system

The regional tier of government is relatively new in the Irish context. While the State has had regional structures in health and education for several decades, it was not until 1994 that it established eight regional authorities. These units comprised clusters of local authority areas (i.e. a number of coterminous city / county units), and their membership was drawn from their constituent city and / or county councils, rather than being directly elected by citizens, as is the case in most EU member states, and as the *Planning (Mahon) Tribunal Report (2012)* had recommended.

The regional authorities' primary function was to review each region's development needs and monitor associated Structural Fund spending (Breathnach *et al.*, 2021). This included a light-touch commitment to the coordination of spatial planning through regional planning guidelines. In 1999, the Irish Government established two higher-tier Regional Assemblies, namely the Border, Midland and Western (BMW) regional assembly and Southern & Eastern Regional Assembly. Their membership was drawn from delegates (elected representatives) already sitting on their constituent regional authorities (Breathnach *et al.*, 2021). Their primary purpose was to coordinate the delivery of EU funding programmes, as the BWM Region retained full Objective I status (under EU Cohesion Policy) up to 2006, while the Southern and Eastern Region was designated an Objective I 'Phasing Out' region (MacFeely, 2016). As non-statutory entities, these regional tiers of government were viewed as a "pragmatic response to optimize EU funding,

rather than any real commitment to the creation of meaningful regional structures" (MacFeely, 2016: 383).

The enactment of the *2014 Local Government (Reform) Act* saw the abolition of the eight regional authorities and the reorganisation of the regional assemblies to form three units, namely the Northern & Western, Eastern & Midlands and Southern Regional Assemblies. Their membership is again drawn from the councillors elected to the local authorities within their respective boundaries; with elected members being predominantly nominated by their local authorities to represent the region. As with the previous regional structures, the assemblies are responsible for the management of the EU Regional Operational Programmes and other EU funding within their respective regions and, potentially more importantly, the development of regional and spatial economic strategies (RSES) (Breathnach *et al.*, 2021) as a core implementing structure of the National Planning Framework (NPF).

3.2. Decision-Making Competencies of Local Government

Ireland's local authorities received constitutional recognition in 1999, on the one-hundred-and-first anniversary of the formation of the current local government system. However, the constitution does not provide any basis of defining their functions or competencies; those are defined in legislation. As things stand, Ireland's local authorities are entrusted with competencies in the following areas:

- Housing and building – including the provision of social and affordable housing, the administration of housing supports / payments and enforcement of minimum standards in private rented accommodation;
- Planning and place-making – including town and village renewal, addressing dereliction, master-planning (including county/city development plans, local area plans, local economic and community plans, town centre first plans, core strategies, retail strategies, etc.) and forward planning;
- Planning permission and development control – including zoning of land-use types, and processing of applications for development;
- Economic development and enterprise – including funding and supports;
- Climate mitigation – through the development of Climate Action Plans;
- Essential services such as roads (including road safety, parking, traffic wardens, setting speed limits and gritting) and bridges, fire services, drainage and (some) ports and harbours;
- Environmental protection in relation to pollution and animal control – including issuing licences for waste disposal, and industrial air emissions, collecting waste, issuing dog and horse licences and dog / horse welfare;
- Recreation, artistic and cultural amenities, facilities and services – including libraries, parks, museums and monuments; and
- Maintaining the register of electors.

While this listing at first glance may seem to tally with the responsibilities of local authorities across Europe, “Irish local authorities have quite restricted responsibilities in these areas” (Reidy, 2018: 4). While the 2014 Act resulted in elected members being given some additional powers and responsibilities in local and community development and supporting economic development and enterprise at a local level, local government has been experiencing a loss of functions over the past two decades as a result of centralising reforms. This is particularly evident in the areas of health, education, and waste and water services (Creamer and Hayward, 2023).

The European Committee of the Regions notes, on its website, that “a distinguishing characteristic of local government in Ireland is the relatively limited range of functions undertaken by local authorities. By way of comparison, many local authorities in other OECD countries have responsibility for a much broader range of services”. It ranks Ireland lowest of the twenty-seven EU member states in respect of the level of decentralisation^{xiii}. This implies that there are fewer powers, responsibilities and resources transferred from central government to elected sub-national structures in Ireland than in any other EU member state.

Decision-making competencies fall into two broad categories; these are reserved and executive functions. Councillors exercise the former and council chief executives exercise the latter. Reserved functions are defined in legislation, and they include the following^{xiv}:

- Adopting the county / city development plan (CDP) and local area plans;
- Adoption of statements regarding the economic elements of the local economic and community plan (LECP);
- Consideration of and making amendments to a draft budgetary plan;
- Consideration and adoption of an annual schedule of proposed works to be carried out in the district;
- Establishing a community fund for the purposes of supporting community initiatives;

- Setting and overseeing procedures for the effective running of meetings and the conduct of members;
- Making representations to central government;
- Deciding the status of roads and rights of way (in defined situations); and
- Making by-laws in relation to traffic, road safety, school wardens, trees, casual trading, litter control and the use of dwellings, placenames and the change of use of local authority facilities.

The 2014 legislation extended the functions of local authorities in respect of economic and community development and sectoral planning, and Ireland's local authorities make significant investments in infrastructure. The OECD notes, however, that such investments are generally undertaken on behalf of the State, and "local councils have very limited spending responsibilities. Ireland is one of the most centralised countries of the OECD, with one of the lowest ratios to GDP and public spending among OECD countries, together with Chile, Greece and New Zealand" (OECD, 2016: 1). In September 2023, a draft^{xv} report card (since adopted), issued by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe (CLRAE) made similar observations^{xvi}.

3.2.1. Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Ireland

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE) is charged with strengthening local and regional democracy within its' member states and is responsible for monitoring the application of the *European Charter of Local Self-Government* which Ireland ratified in May 2002. In April and May 2023, a monitoring mission to Ireland was conducted to assess the application of the European Charter. This entailed meeting with representatives of various institutions at all levels of government.

On a positive note, the newly adopted report acknowledges the strong connection between local authorities and their citizens, that those services they do provide are delivered to a high standard and that participative democracy is well developed. The rapporteurs also note that national government proclaims commitment to

further reform, including the establishment of directly elected mayors (DEMs) which should see a rebalancing of powers between the councillors and the council executive. On the other hand, the report also draws attention to the large size of local government units, the low number of councillors per citizen (relative to other democracies) and central government's strong influence over decision-making and funding allocations.

The report card claims that the *2014 Local Government (Reform) Act* violates the principle of subsidiarity, as it has increased a shift in power from local to central government. It also criticises the extent to which power has been transferred from elected councillors to local authority chief executives. The CLRAE report's conclusion is that local government is weaker in Ireland than in most other European countries, and it notes that Ireland's ranking is just above those of Hungary, the Russian Federation and Moldova. In terms of recommendations the report calls for the transfer of additional functions to local authorities and a reduction in administration supervision. The Monitoring Committee express a wish to see the continued reform of the council executive beyond DEMs; a reform that would also see councillors being directly elected to the regional assemblies.

There are significant synergies between the findings of this research, as presented in the next section, and the CLRAE report as ratified in October. These add significant weight to the recommendations in terms of further reforms, and their timeliness, as outlined in Chapter 5.

3.3. Representative Democracy

Article 28A of the Irish Constitution declares, "the State recognises the role of local government in providing a forum for the democratic representation of local communities, in exercising and performing at local level powers and functions conferred by law and in promoting by its initiatives the interests of such communities." This constitutional recognition of local government as a democratic forum and the article's further declaration that there should be elections to local authorities at least every five years are an important recognition of the representative role councillors play.

At present, there are 949 elected councillors serving on local authorities – down from 1,627 pre-2014. The following table presents the number of councillors per local authority and their gender breakdown. These figures relate to the outcome of the most recent local government elections (2019),

and it should be noted that there have been some resignations and co-options since then. The figures indicate that Ireland falls short of the gender balance recommended by the Council of Europe^{xvii}.

Table 3.2: Membership of Ireland's local authorities following the 2019 local elections

Local Authority	Number of Seats	Total Number of Candidates	Number of Women Candidates	Women as % of Candidates	Number of Women Elected	Women as a % of members elected
City Councils						
Cork	31	82	24	29.3	6	19.4
Dublin	63	150	61	40.7	26	41.3
Galway	18	47	12	25.5	5	27.8
Total City Councils	112	279	97	34.8%	37	33.0%
City & County Councils						
Limerick	40	92	20	21.7	8	20.0
Waterford	32	66	20	30.3	2	6.3
Total City & County Councils	72	158	40	25.3%	10	13.9%
County Councils						
Carlow	18	31	5	16.1	2	11.1
Cavan	18	33	9	27.3	4	22.2
Clare	28	51	11	21.6	4	14.3
Cork County	55	107	33	30.8	15	27.3
Donegal	37	85	17	20.0	4	10.8
Dún Laoghaire - Rathdown	40	73	34	46.6	19	47.5
Fingal	40	89	28	31.5	11	27.5
Galway County	39	78	15	19.2	7	18.0
Kerry	33	62	13	21.0	6	18.2
Kildare	40	90	29	32.2	16	40.0
Kilkenny	24	44	11	25.0	3	12.5
Laois	19	39	10	25.6	5	26.3
Leitrim	18	32	6	18.8	3	16.7
Longford	18	39	10	25.6	1	5.6
Louth	29	60	14	23.3	9	31.0
Mayo	30	63	10	15.9	2	6.7
Meath	40	78	28	35.9	13	32.5
Monaghan	18	33	7	21.2	3	16.7
Offaly	19	36	8	22.2	2	10.5
Roscommon	18	33	4	12.1	3	16.7
Sligo	18	35	7	20.0	3	16.7
South Dublin	40	92	36	39.1	14	35.0
Tipperary	40	79	22	27.9	8	20.0
Westmeath	20	49	15	30.6	4	20.0
Wexford	34	67	18	26.9	6	17.7
Wicklow	32	62	25	40.3	12	37.5
Total County Councils	765	1540	425	27.6%	179	23.4%
All Local Authorities	949	1977	562	28.4%	226	23.8%

(Source: AILG in written communications to authors).

Table 3.3: Number of councillors per person in selected European countries, 2022

Country	Number of Councillors	Population	Councillors per population
Ireland	949	5,123,536	5,399
Denmark	2,432	5,833,692	2,399
Norway	6,420	5,507,594	858
Slovakia	20,646	5,465,021	265
Slovenia	5,512	2,079,520	377

(Adapted from Chatry and Hulbert, 2017, OECD, 2023 and International Observatory on Participatory Democracy website^{xviii}).

Relative to most other democracies, Ireland has relatively few elected councillors per citizen. Indeed, the State has the highest ratio of persons per councillor of any EU member state.

Table 3.3. above provides some comparative data in respect of the number of councillors in other similar-sized countries.

Commenting on the effects of scale and function on the roles played by councillors, Callanan (2018: 62) remarks, “given the large size of local government units in Ireland, the task of Irish councillors in representing their constituents is a considerable one... Of course, some might argue that this challenge is somewhat moderated by the fact that local government in Ireland possesses fewer functional responsibilities than in other developed countries.”

- While Ireland’s local authorities exercise important democratic and service-delivery functions, their functional remit is narrower, and they are more poorly resourced; and
- There is a diversity deficit in Ireland’s council chambers, and women are notably under-represented, especially in rural counties.

3.4. Summary Remarks

This chapter builds on the contextual material that was presented in Chapter 2, as it presents quantitative data on Ireland’s local government system in comparative context. In summary, the data reveals that, per capita, and relative to the EU and OECD averages:

- Ireland has far fewer councillors – the lowest ratio of councillors to citizens;
- Ireland’s local authority units (cities and counties) are extremely large in geographical and demographic terms;

SECTION 2:

Presentation of Findings

Chapter 4: The 21st Century Councillor



This chapter presents the findings from the primary data collection with councillors in Ireland. It focuses specifically on the findings from the online questionnaire, interviews and focus groups conducted among councillors during the period April to November 2022. The findings are presented in respect of the five themes that emerged from the international literature review and subsequent deliberations with the AILG. The themes are as follows:

- The Role of Councillors;
- Challenges facing Councillors;
- Implications of Reforms and Reconfigurations;
- Possible Innovations; and
- Tools and Skills.

In respect of each theme, the section is laid out as follows:

- A short recap on the relevant literature;
- Presentation of findings from the online questionnaire; and
- Presentation of findings from the interviews and focus groups.

4.1. The Role(s) of Councillors

Key Messaging

- Councillors play multiple statutory and representative roles. The terms that best describe their roles are ‘advocate’, ‘fixer / problem solver’, ‘civic leader’ and ‘information conduit’. Most councillors perceive that their roles are changing rapidly.
- The vast majority of councillors enjoy their work, particularly being a voice for constituents. Most councillors, especially those who are based in rural counties, believe their representative roles enable them to better perform their statutory roles.
- For most councillors, working with communities is important and rewarding, and they enjoy supporting community groups to get things done and improve the quality of life for local people.
- Of the limited range of functions that councillors do have, housing is the single biggest issue that impacts on the work they do. Many are frustrated by the lack of progress on national housing policy commitments.
- Housing-related matters are among the primary sources of vexation among constituents, and councillors report receiving abuse from members of the public in relation to housing issues, including the impacts of strategic housing developments, homelessness and waiting lists for social or affordable housing. Planning for housing is also a challenge – mainly in rural areas.
- Councillors believe they could exercise their roles more effectively if meetings and procedures could be streamlined and less bureaucratic. They also believe many members of the public do not fully understand their roles and the functional remits of local authorities.
- There is a need for awareness raising in respect of the roles councillors play, and the forthcoming work of An Coimisiún Toghcháin, in advance of the 2024 elections, provides opportunities in that regard.

Irish and international literature indicates that councillors play multiple roles. As directly elected public representatives, they make decisions that affect citizens and communities. Decision-making roles can be formal, such as the adoption of county and city development plans (CDPs) and the approval of local authorities’ annual budgets. Councillors also play informal and quasi-formal roles that involve interfacing between citizens, communities, local authority officials, public bodies and national and EU-level politicians – TDs, senators and MEPs. The aforementioned study by the University of Birmingham (Mangan *et al.*, 2016) noted that the roles councillors play have been changing, particularly in response to an evolving public sector landscape. Among the emerging roles they identified were steward of place, advocate, buffer, sensemaker, catalyst, entrepreneur and

orchestrator. The UK study also suggested that austerity policies could be contributing to a diminution of the councillor’s role.

Being a public representative at the local level involves representing citizens, articulating issues and concerns, providing leadership, devising solutions to local problems, negotiating with council officials and making representations to public bodies and higher-tier decision-makers. While Ireland’s local government system has a narrower functional remit than in most other EU member states, councillors play an important role in devising and overseeing the implementation of legislation, including by-laws (see Chapter 3). Councillors meet in plenary session every month, and council meetings, which are open to the public, are generally covered by local media.

Councillors also sit on several local authority bodies, including Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), and they represent their local authority, and by extension the public interest, on external bodies including Education and Training Boards (ETBs), regional health fora and regional assemblies among other structures.

In addition to exercising formal, statutory and representative roles, councillors are expected to provide community leadership and to deal with specific local issues, some of which are outside the remit of local authorities. Citizens and civil society organisations often approach councillors to source information for them and to make representations on their behalf to local and national authorities, service providers, utility companies and decision-makers. Councillors are regularly invited to speak at community events, and citizens see them as local leaders, information conduits and advocates. The literature on local government suggests that while citizens may engage frequently with councillors, their roles are not always well understood or appreciated. The international literature also identifies several constraints in respect of the roles councillors play in our society.

4.1.1. Councillors' perceptions of their roles

As part of the online questionnaire, councillors were presented with a list of possible roles, and in

each case, they were invited to state the extent to which each one describes the roles they play. As the following graph illustrates, the four roles (from the list), which councillors perceive best describe the roles they play are:

- Advocate;
- Problem solver / fixer;
- Information conduit; and
- Civic leader.

These roles are associated with community leadership, and as the subsequent interviews and focus groups with councillors revealed, their experiences and backgrounds in community work (in its broadest sense) and voluntary organisations were to the fore among the factors that motivated them to stand for election to local government. The research findings also show that councillors are less inclined to describe their roles in terms of the more formal or legislative functions (e.g. legislator, overseer, policy-maker) with which they are charged. Consultations with councillors, through the interviews and focus groups, indicate that their low ranking (as illustrated in Figure 4.1) of their 'legislator' and 'overseer' functions can be associated with their lack of decision-making competencies. Thus, the findings indicate that informal, community-based and advocacy roles are significant in the lives of councillors.

Figure 4.1: Extent to which councillors perceive given terms describe their roles

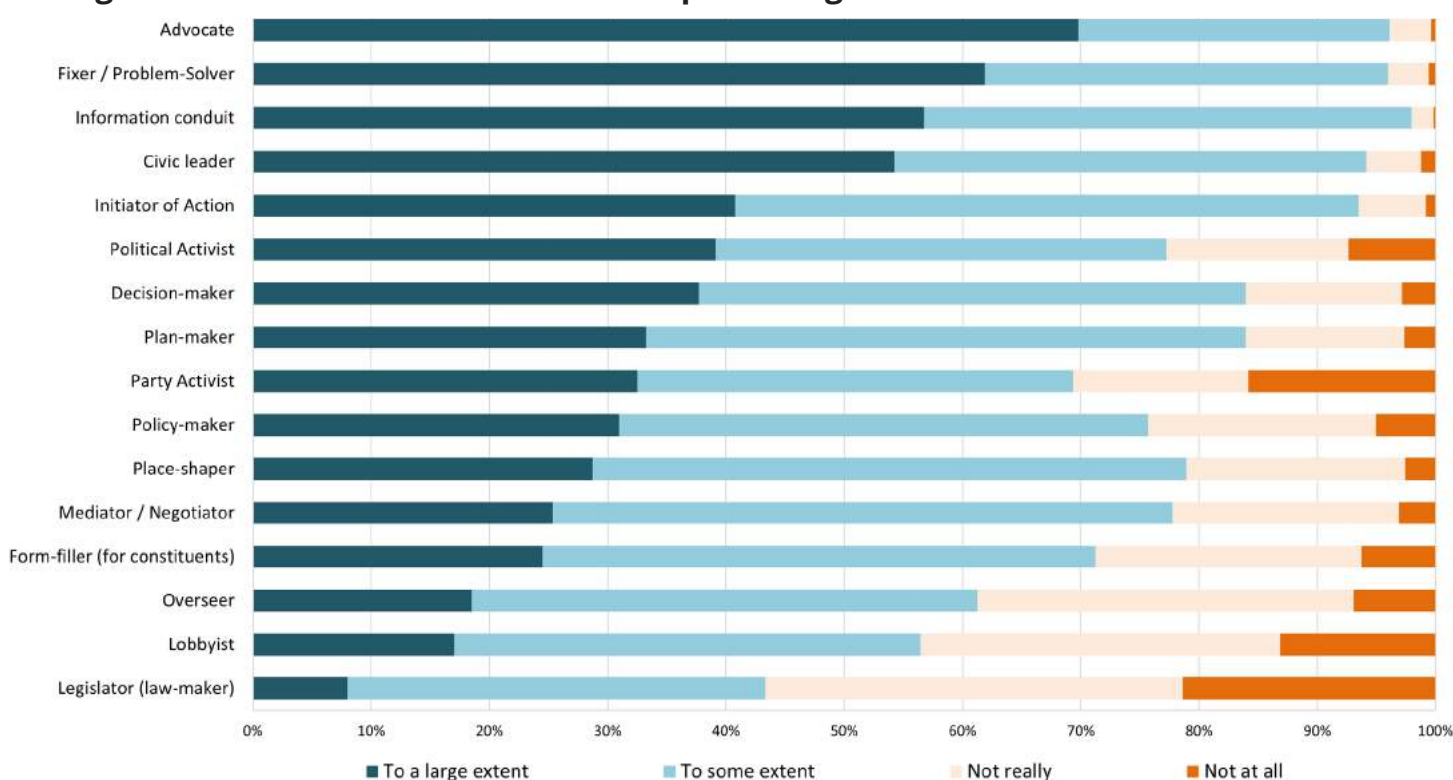
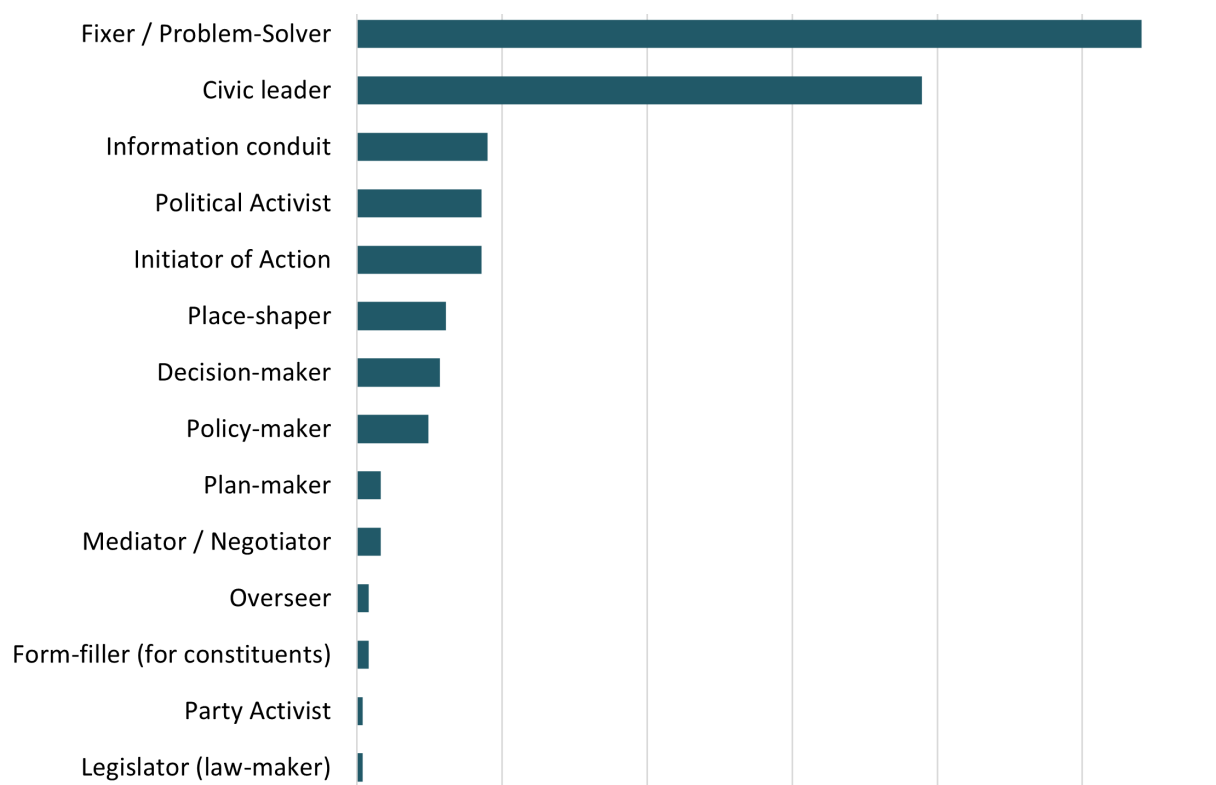


Figure 4.2: Roles with councillors feel best describe them

Councillors were also asked to identify the one role that would best describe them, and as the following graph (Figure 4.2) shows, 'advocate' is the most popular choice. 'Problem-solver / fixer' is the second-most popular descriptor. These two roles (advocate and problem-solver / fixer) are related to councillors' representative roles more than their legislative / statutory or policy-making roles, although as the online questionnaire also reveals, councillors believe there are synergies between both sets of roles.

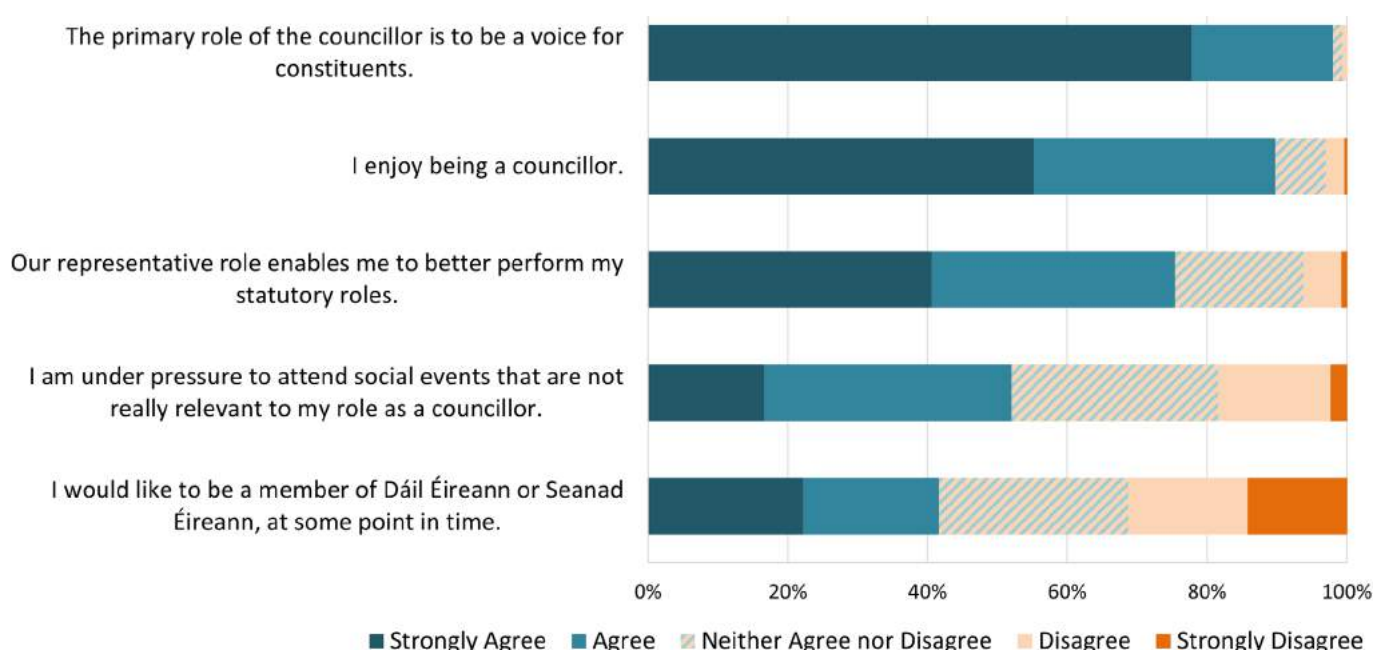
Appendix D 1.1 presents a breakdown of responses to this question across a number of independent variables including gender, length of service, educational attainment level and geography. As the analysis reveals, there are no discernible

differences across any of these variables. While over three quarters (76%) of councillors report that 'advocate', 'fixer / problem-solver' or 'civic leader' are the three roles that best describe them, the questionnaire findings signal that such perceptions are likely to change over the coming years. Forty-five percent of councillors – across both genders – believe their role is changing very rapidly, and it can be difficult to keep pace with the changes. Meanwhile, over a fifth of councillors perceive that their role is being eclipsed or fading, and as the following table shows, females are more likely than are males to hold this view:

Table 4.1: Councillors' perceptions of changes in their role

Perception	Female	Male	All
The role of the councillor is changing very rapidly, and it can be difficult to keep pace with the changes.	45.70%	45.32%	45.05%
The role of the councillor is changing gradually, and I am able to keep pace with the changes.	18.54%	27.19%	24.04%
The role of the councillor remains constant and steady.	8.61%	8.76%	8.89%
The role of the councillor is being eclipsed or fading.	27.15%	18.73%	22.02%

Figure 4.3: Extent to which councillors agree or disagree with given statements about their roles



Appendix D 1.2 presents a breakdown of councillors' responses to these perceptions on several independent variables, and while it reveals some variations, depending on length of service and geography, these are not statistically significant; the modal response (regardless of length of service and geography) is that the councillor's role is 'changing very rapidly, and it can be difficult to keep pace with the changes.' Drawing on the international literature, the questionnaire presented respondents with five statements about their experiences of councillors' roles. The following graph (Figure 4.3) shows the extent to which councillors either agree or disagree with those statements:

The findings reveal that ninety-seven percent of councillors agree that their primary role is to be a voice for constituents, and over three quarters (78%) of them strongly agree with that statement. Almost ninety percent of respondents report that they enjoy being a councillor, while over half (55%) strongly agree with that assertion.

The international literature on the role of councillors refers to their statutory and representative roles and the complementarities between them. The AILG contends that the Moorhead Report (2020), which examined the role of councillors in Ireland and made recommendations on their terms and conditions, focused on their statutory roles and did not take

due account of their representative roles. Through this research, the questionnaire results reveal that almost three quarters of councillors agree that the representative roles they perform enable them to better execute their statutory roles. As Figure 4.3 above shows, forty percent of councillors strongly agree with this view.

Just over half (52%) of Irish councillors report feeling under pressure to attend social events that are not really relevant to their roles as councillors. When this issue was explored in the interviews some councillors reported that citizens expect them to be omni-present, and while citizens' expectations of councillors can be unreasonably high, councillors see a value in continuing to engage with, and listen to, citizens and community groups in social settings.

Local government is often seen as a stepping stone to national office, and the questionnaire findings reveal that just over forty percent of councillors would like to be a member of Dáil Éireann, with over a fifth of them reporting that they strongly agree with that statement. Meanwhile almost one third of councillors disagreed with this statement – indicating that their preference is to remain in local government.

Appendix D 1.3 presents a breakdown of councillors' responses to these statements

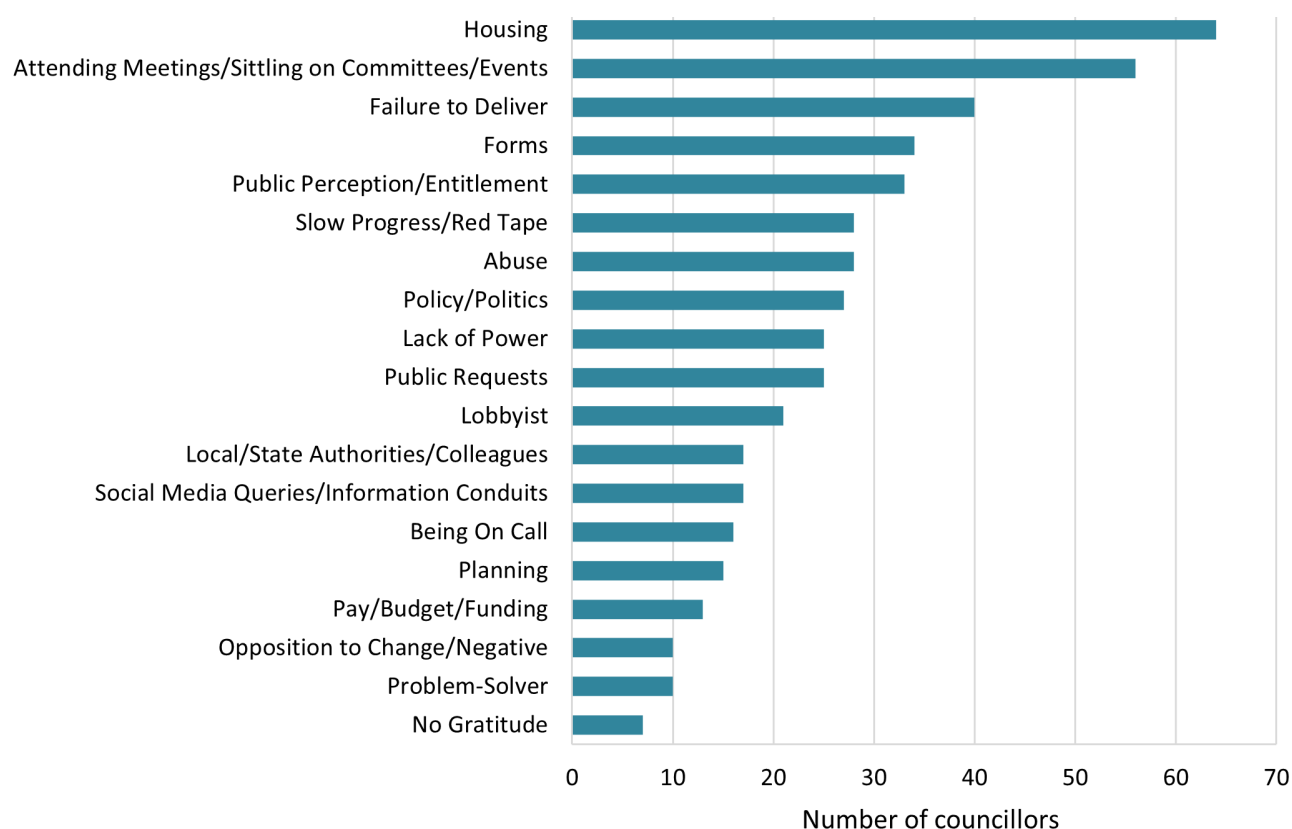
(in Figure 4.3) – broken down by gender, length of service, educational attainment and geography, and while this analysis shows a high degree of consensus among all respondents, there are some divergences – indicated by a difference of eight percentage points among respondents, and in this regard, the following are worth noting:

- (in Figure 4.3) – broken down by gender, length of service, educational attainment and geography, and while this analysis shows a high degree of consensus among all respondents, there are some divergences – indicated by a difference of eight percentage points among respondents, and in this regard, the following are worth noting:
- Almost a third (31.5%) of councillors who have been elected within the past five years strongly agree with the statement ‘I would like to be a member of Dáil Éireann’, while only one in eight councillors who are in office for at least ten years strongly agree with it.
 - More females (28.1%) than males (19.8%) strongly agree that they would like to be in Dáil Éireann.
 - There is a positive correlation between length of service and enjoyment of the role. Over two thirds of long-serving councillors (those who are in office for 10+ years) strongly agree that they enjoy being a councillor, while among newer councillors, the rates (of strong agreement) are lower (47% among those who are councillors for under five years and 50% for those who are in post for between 5 and 10 years).
 - All respondents (100%) in the Border, Mid-East, Mid-West, South-East and West (NUTS III) regions agree with the statement that ‘the primary role of the councillor is to be a voice for constituents’. The level of agreement is slightly lower among councillors in Dublin (92%) and among councillors in the South West (92%).
 - Councillors in Dublin and the Mid-East (68.6% and 72.6% respectively) are somewhat less likely than are councillors from other regions (median value = 76%) to agree with the statement that ‘our representative role enables me to better perform my statutory roles.’
- The following wordcloud visualises councillors’ responses when they were asked an open-ended question – to identify their most rewarding role. Figure 4.4 visualises councillors enjoy working with people – communities and individuals, helping members of the public and solving problems for groups and families. Among the themes that come to the fore most frequently are housing, parks and roads. The wordcloud highlights the significance of councillors’ representative roles, more than their statutory functions.

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Figure 4.4: The most-rewarding roles councillors perform



Figure 4.5: The least-rewarding roles councillors perform – thematic analysis^{xix}

Councillors were also asked to identify their least rewarding role. This question was open-ended, and the research team categorised all responses by theme / issue. As the following graph shows, councillors perceive that their least-rewarding role relates to housing. This is followed by the obligation to, and experience of, attending meetings.

In their follow-up comments, several councillors referred to the linkages between the tasks / roles listed above and their wider experience of being a councillor and the sense of powerlessness they feel. The following comments are emblematic of their perceptions:

- It's a perverse role, and it is addictive if you have a certain type of personality, but you need to give your life over to it. You cannot have a family, you will not see your friends, you will be at the beck and call of your constituents;
- Reduction of real powers has impacted negatively on how we do our job;
- The public do not understand the actual role of a councillor, because many longstanding councillors are performing roles that are not part of the job. This leads to a lot of work on my part in managing expectations.
- The people who get to decide what my role is are the people who vote for me, not civil servants. Trying to denigrate the representation role that councillors play is effectively a coup.
- The role of the Councillor is being increasingly undermined by central government policy, which dictates to local authorities on how and when services are delivered.
- We don't have enough power or budget. I enjoy meeting constituents, I like when I can help them, but so far there's little scope for wider changes in my town and county. It can be incredibly frustrating. Like, how does it take more than 50 years to provide a public swimming pool in an area that has grown by 60,000 people in that time? On the representative role, I find the amount of time it can take to make a representation properly detracts massively from the time I have available for other projects and statutory functions like approving the county development plan.
- I think councillors should represent their communities, but also be true to the political platform they sought election on - occasionally saying no to requests which they disagree with.

- Huge expectations to attend all events but then you are accused of ‘attending the opening of an envelope’ by the cynics.

The interviews and focus groups provided councillors with opportunities to expand on their responses to the online questionnaire and to tease out several of the issues relating to their current and evolving roles.

In the interviews and focus groups, several councillors spoke of their frustrations when dealing with housing issues. They referred to the growing waiting lists for social housing and the persistent calls they get from constituents and advocates seeking accommodation and other supports for those who have been affected by Ireland’s housing crisis. They reported that while housing is a national issue, local government officials and councillors are more at the coalface on this matter than are national-level decision-makers. The following are among the remarks that were typically made by councillors:

- “And then, I’m getting the abusive calls saying, ‘you effing cow, you’re helping them and now you’re not helping us’. And you know, our main thing here is housing, and it’s everywhere..., housing, housing, housing. And I keep saying we have the land” (Councillor 29).
- “I feel like housing is very centralised at the moment. And I think [name of housing development] is a great example. So [name of housing development] where [name of council] wanted to do something with the land but didn’t have the finances. And I think [Minister’s name] was Housing Minister at the time, and he wouldn’t release the finances for it... and it shows the lack of power that local government has (Councillor 07^{xx}).
- “They don’t believe us. I mean, I was the [sectoral] SPC chair for the last three years, so I was inundated. Everybody was ringing me from everywhere... from [name of county] and [name of county], and people were ringing because they thought like that I had great power” (Councillor 28^{xxi}).
- “SHDs - the Strategic Housing Developments - they can just shelf the county development plan, shelf one of our strongest powers that a local council has, how we see the future of our county and put it to one side, we’re going to ignore that. And this is what we’re going to do. To me, that’s an absolute affront to democracy” (Councillor 32).

Councillors spoke of their helplessness and powerlessness, due to the scale and urgency of the housing issue, and some referred to the local-level fallout from successive governments’ under-investment in the provision of public / social housing and the over-reliance on the private sector. While the questionnaire focused on the role of the councillor, rather than on the powers of local authorities per se, most respondents referred spontaneously to what they perceive to be increasingly pervasive centralisation and an erosion of local authorities’ powers, and especially the power of the councillor, relative to the executive.

4.1.2. Internal systems - interfacing with fellow councils and with executives

The monthly council meeting is the most public and open forum in which councillors exercise their statutory and representative roles. Councillors reported that, on many occasions, council meetings can last for several hours. While they are supportive of public debate and dialogue, several councillors expressed frustrations at some aspects of the way in which council meetings are conducted. Some interviewees and focus group participants criticised their colleagues for ‘playing to the media’ and seeking to gain notoriety or attract publicity rather than devising solutions to local and / or policy issues. They also referred to a practice, mainly in rural councils, whereby councillors repeat statements made by their colleagues, either as a way of putting their support or opposition on the record and / or ensuring their names are included in media reports about the matter under discussion. Some of the remarks councillors made about meetings were as follows:

- “it’s very important that we get to ask the questions for our constituents. And I understand that, but sometimes, they can just be used as speechmaking. And really, nobody’s listening in the council chamber, and all our meetings are now on YouTube” (Councillor 11).
- “Council meetings usually are a circus where people are playing to the public and the media and making comments, perhaps, they shouldn’t” (Councillor 22).

Thus, the research findings (both questionnaire responses, interviews and focus group discussions) point to a need for greater efficiencies in the way meetings are conducted. Some councillors remarked that regional assembly meetings are more effective. As one councillor reported, about the regional assembly (RA):

“

Because it's kind of a different footing... it's more progressive, ...more work like, and it's not as political as what you would say your own local authority is. You're pulling for one region... but the [name of county] media doesn't cover the [name of] Regional Assembly, so there is no political grandstanding like you get in the, your local authority, like it's all about scoring points that, you know... a lot of people grandstand and cause controversy” (Councillor 16^{xxii})”

Councillors also referred to management systems within their own local authorities, and some noted that it has become more difficult to access, or speak to, officials about housing, and other issues. While they appreciate the integrity of each local authority having a fair and transparent system to govern the allocation of housing resources, many councillors feel they would like to be able to make representations on behalf of constituents and “to connect people to whatever council service can fix their problem” (Councillor 23). Others spoke about their frustrations about having to use ICT systems to access staff (in housing among other departments), rather than being able to ‘pick-up the phone and talk to somebody’. As one councillor observed, “I’m on the committee for the, for the members’ portal. And to be perfectly honest with you, it’s not working... That’s my frustration with it, that sometimes you just need to be on the phone; it’s quicker to get things through the phone” (Councillor 02). While a long-serving councillor remarked, “back in my time, you had a County Manager, County Secretary and a County Engineer; they were the top three. And if you had an issue, you could talk to the County Manager, or if there was something wrong, he would pick up the phone and ring the County Engineer and say, ‘what’s

wrong?’. Now you have a hierarchy. You have a CEO; you have Directors of Services; under them, you have assigned officers for this that and the other thing, you’ll have a huge plethora. And the result is, it’s very hard to go back and find out” (Councillor 34).

4.1.3. Understanding the role of the councillor...or sometimes not

The questionnaire findings revealed that the public’s (mis) understanding of councillors’ roles is one of the main challenges they currently face. By the same token, many councillors believe that increasing the public’s knowledge of local government, and specifically of the role of the councillor (including what he / she can and cannot do) would be enabling of local democracy and would ensure councillors’ work is more enjoyable and rewarding.

Several councillors spoke about public perceptions of their roles, and a widespread lack of understanding about what a councillor can and cannot do. They reported being asked to address issues relating to health and education and other policy and public service domains that are outside the scope of local authorities. Councillors reported that some constituents and advocates are bewildered or shocked when a councillor says he / she is unable to help with a particular matter. As the dilution of powers has been subtle, there is a widespread unawareness of these loss of functions over the decades. As some councillors recounted:

- “Mary and Joe Soap think that the councillor has an ability to change local authority decisions, which is not the fact. They... kind of think that we’re mini-TDs... There is the perception out there” (Councillor 21).
- “Other issues could be complaints about the hospital or things like that, they would bring to you, and... think I have some influence over that when, really, I don’t at all like. Garda issues, people will bring it to you and say, ‘you know, we need more guards, you need to get more guards here’. They wouldn’t really understand that I have no control over that whatsoever as well” (Councillor 17).
- “I’d like people to have a better idea of what we do, what the day-to-day job is, that it’s not just get the hedge trimmed, get potholes filled, get the lights fixed, don’t put double yellow

lines here – put double yellow lines there, that sort of thing, that there is a kind of a, you know, there's a... there's a countywide dimension to the job (Councillor 19).

Others report that they are routinely contacted at night, at weekends and even on public holidays (including Christmas Day), asking them to deal with particular issues. Thus, while councillors want to be open and accessible, they can sometimes feel like they are public property. One councillor summed up the experiences of many colleagues, "Oh, no, no, it's full-time. You can't...you couldn't do it part-time. I mean I get stopped, I get stopped on Christmas Day and coming out, coming out of Mass or church or wherever, you know. People asked me if I can ring you? 'I'm sorry for annoying you at this time, but could you answer this for me?' You're on the phone. You're chasing up stuff. You're actually chasing up an awful lot of stuff that, that should be passed on to the TDs in fact and you're trying to..." (Councillor 35). Similarly, another councillor reported, "Like, I was at a funeral this morning. And I suppose I got six problems at that funeral. 'You don't mind me asking you this' was the first thing they'd say in the funeral. 'You don't mind me asking you, but...' It could be Sunday evening. It could be anywhere. Like, I'd have more people calling here of a Sunday because they know I'd probably be here" (Councillor 33). Thus, the findings point to a need to increase public awareness of the remit of local government and the roles of the councillors therein and to ensure that citizens are reasonable in how, where and when they deal with councillors. The newly established *Coimisiún Toghcháin*^{xxiii} (Electoral Commission) is charged with promoting public awareness of and working to increase public participation in the State's electoral and democratic processes through education and information programmes. It is clear that consideration must be given to raising awareness of the role and remit of councillors as part of their 2024 work, prior to the local and European elections.

Social media have made councillors more accessible, and most use platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to inform people about local issues, the work of local government, public service provision and elements of public policy. While such information flows are enabling of councillors' work, social media has particular challenges. One councillor summed up the apprehensions many councillors have: "I know some politicians do

engage in it [social media], but I wouldn't because you can only attract the worst kind of people making comments about you and about other politicians as well... Because they can make these comments, you see, and they're anonymous. You don't know them. You don't know who they are or where they're from, but they can do it and get away with it" (Councillor 04).

Notwithstanding these challenges, the research findings show that most councillors enjoy their roles, and they feel they are making a difference. They indicate that they enjoy and value dealing with the public, particularly community groups and they get satisfaction from seeing investments and developments in their communities. The following quotes are emblematic of their experiences:

- "If you do the representation, and you help them solve issues, that's a good thing" (Councillor 31).
- "I genuinely love it. I really get good enjoyment out it... Personally, as well as putting my [name of political party] hat on, I try and influence policies with a kind of a left-leaning thing, but the likes of Mrs. Murphy has a pothole outside, like getting that filled.... Like there is the day-to-day stuff. I like interaction with people, I still do that, I still go out door-to-door once a week for that personal interaction" (Councillor 32^{xxiv}).
- "I think most of my colleagues would agree that we get far more done in terms of supporting community groups or getting projects or funding applications, whatever, it's RRDF... agreeing what's going out to Part 8, on a new cycle lanes and one-way systems and that within the town" (Councillor 30).
- "I'd be a practical politician, you know, in a rural part of the constituency, which is about getting projects delivered. So, you know, getting roads, tarred and surfaced, relief roads done, old like commission roads, which were abandoned for the best part of seventy years, like, I've got lot of those schemes done, whereby community involvement schemes, where you get a lot of farmers involved to contribute towards the upkeep of the road... I help people out then with obviously, with housing applications and planning permissions; that's the meat and bones kind of stuff, you know. That's important because it's, it's tangible, it's touchable, it's doing stuff and getting things done that you

can point at and say, “well, that was done, this was done, and money was spent here”. Street lighting, footpaths, things of that nature, you know, rather than just waffling on Twitter and just thinking you’re wonderful” (Councillor 14).

- “My most valuable role, I suppose would be fighting for funding for good projects that’s close to the heart of the communities... And going to the engineers to try and get roadrepairs carried out. That’s very important. And the General Municipal Allocation Fund... it’s important for the council that we have that fund, and we manage it and manage it well, that you might have your local GAA Club, or Athletic Club or Camogie club or senior citizens” (Councillor 05).
- “There are things that I’ve been able to do for people for, mostly for individuals, which has been very rewarding... I’m on a number of committees and boards and things like that as a result of being a councillor. And just for an example, being on the Health Forum, the Regional Health Forum allows you to make a difference to people who are maybe on waiting lists or things like that, and I’m not just talking about jumping the queue, it’s just getting the right person to listen... You also get to raise issues for people and that’s always rewarding, you know, be there.... You know, this week, I had somebody on to me..., I went to a football match on Sunday, and somebody was on to me about getting a couple of disabled parking spaces outside a post office. And they’re actually very easy fixes. There’s no huge cost involved in doing something like that. And, and you’ll generally find that you’re pushing an open door” (Councillor 11).
- “You know, the role is amazing... I think it would be important for the government to take another look at the designation of the role as part time and to reflect the realities of what the role is, and that was essentially what I was trying to communicate there but in terms of fulfilment, it’s absolutely wonderful to be able to do what you do, to make the community a better place, you know, to advance the cause, pointing people in the right direction, providing information, you know, letting them understand that you are there if they lacked anything you can do, can always come to you to assist” (Focus Group 01).

4.1.4. Summary Remarks

The data presented in this section (on the role of the councillor) reveal that elected members place considerable emphasis and value on the representative roles they perform. They are committed to the role (its statutory and representative elements) and take a lot of satisfaction from the difference they can make to both people and place. The main roles performed by councillors (advocate, problem-solver/fixer and civic leader) are inter-related. While they generally enjoy their engagements with members of the public, especially communities, complexities and frustrations arise that are associated with the limited powers councillors have and with citizens having a poor or limited understanding of the roles of councillors and the functions of local authorities. These complexities and frustrations are most acute in respect of housing issues, and many councillors are under undue pressures due to the current shortcomings in Ireland’s housing system.

4.2. Challenges facing Councillors

Key Messaging

- Being a councillor is rewarding, but the role is demanding, and councillors are continuously striving to attain a decent work-life balance. They work long and unsociable hours, and while their remuneration has improved in recent years, it remains relatively low.
- Councillors perceive that their powers have been eroded, and many object to the transfers of functional responsibilities from local authorities to 'state quangos'.
- Poor remuneration, significant workloads, limited powers and frustrations with the operations of the local government system are contributing to councillors exiting the role and retiring early, and these factors are barriers to candidate recruitment.
- Female councillors face greater challenges than their male colleagues in terms of attaining a work-life balance, and they are more likely to be subject to prejudices that can impact on their work. While the gender balance in council chambers has improved, female representation lags behind that in other EU member states, and there are particular challenges recruiting female candidates and retaining female councillors.
- While societies are becoming more diverse, homogeneity tends to persist in council chambers.
- Policy issues and abuse from the public, especially on social media, can pose particular challenges, but there can also be challenges associated with the behaviour of other councillors and perceived stumbling-blocks (to decision-making and project actualisation) within local authorities.

As noted in the previous section (4.1), there are many challenges interspersed with the role of the councillor. The aforementioned international literature also highlights a number of challenges, and it reveals these tend to be universal rather than specific to any particular geography or local government system. Councillors, across all jurisdictions, report challenges in respect of meeting the competing demands on their time and dealing with citizens' expectations. The literature acknowledges that life in the public domain can be gruelling and demanding, and politicians find it difficult to 'switch-off' and have private lives. While it postdates the literature and discussions that informed the elaboration of the online questionnaire, the resignation speech of New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinta Ardern (in 2023) and her subsequent interviews effectively synthesise many of the issues that are referenced in international literature including fractured debates, difficulties measuring progress and policy frustrations. Ms Ardern referred, on a personal level, to not having 'enough fuel in the tank'. While

the stakes are much higher for prime ministers than they are for councillors, there are parallels in respect of the issues and the challenges associated with trying to make systemic changes and ensure a balance between their personal / family and professional lives.

Ardern's rationale has parallels with those many councillors who have prematurely exited local government in Ireland (i.e. they retired early, or they did not complete a term of office). Speaking to TG4 on International Women's Day in 2022, former Councillor Deirdre Ní Fhloinn stated that when she was elected, she had expected to be able to put some boundaries around her work. In practice, however, she found herself dealing with people up to 11pm, and while that encroached on family time, she recognised the importance of being available and accessible – to give effect to the councillor's problem-solver / fixer role. Ní Fhloinn also instanced the lack of childcare services, the scheduling and duration of meetings and the

impacts on family (especially children) and friends among the factors that had contributed to her premature exit from local government. When he resigned from Cork County Council in April 2021, Cllr Aidan Lombard stated, “I saw the workload increase in my five years as a councillor, and the last 12 months was particularly difficult for me to balance everything. I can’t dedicate enough of my time to being a full-time county councillor, and that’s why I am stepping down.”^{xxv} In August 2020, a poll-topping councillor, William Priestly, announced his resignation, citing poor pay and conditions. Speaking to the media, he stated,

“

It is €17,000 a year and I think nearly everybody has another job which is self-defeating in a sense that being on the council is something in addition to your main focus and the result of that is people are burning the candle at both ends.^{xxvi}”

”

Jacinta Ardern was one of a small number of female leaders of government, and in Ireland, as is the case in most OECD countries, females account for a minority of councillors. Indeed, in several Irish councils, particularly those west of the Shannon, females account for under twenty percent of the membership. The international literature indicates that gender biases and under-representation among ethnic minorities are challenging in several jurisdictions, and there are problems in respect of retention and recruitment. Thus, while societies are becoming more diverse, homogeneity tends to persist in council chambers.

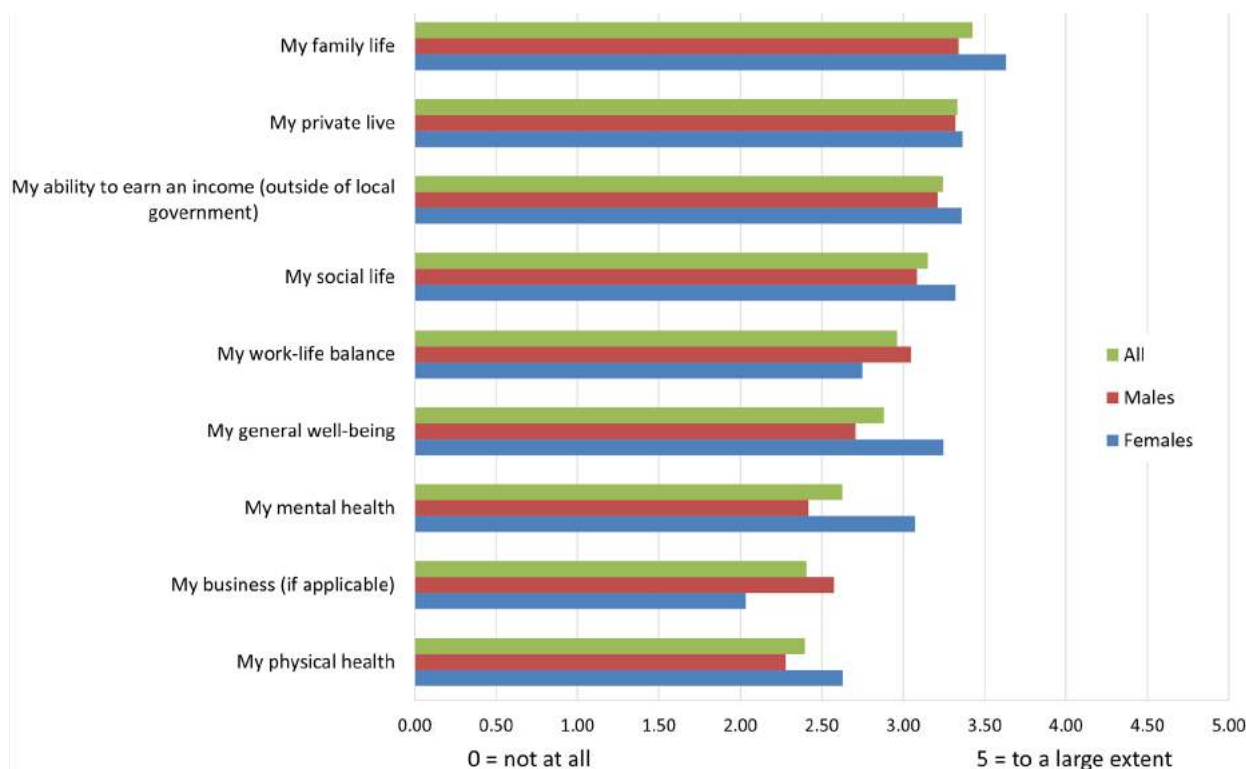
4.2.1. Job satisfaction and challenges

There is a growing body of literature that addresses the challenges facing councillors, among other public officials, emanating from social media. Social media platforms are fast becoming the predominant channel through which councillors communicate with various publics, and although they are efficient in that regard, there are accompanying risks. Public officials, in several countries, report being subjected to online abuse and harassment, with females and members of ethnic minorities being more vulnerable to so-called ‘keyboard warriors’.

The literature, particularly UK-based studies, refers to effects of new public management (NPM) on the work of councillors and the wider interfaces between citizens / consumers and central government. While NPM has brought about economic efficiencies, it has also created parallel domains among executives on the one hand and political decision-makers on the other hand, with the former being more likely to respond to performance-monitoring systems than to councillors. NPM is associated with the privatisation of services that were previously provided by local authorities, and in some jurisdictions, this has had the effect of reducing councils’ abilities to respond to new and emerging challenges and opportunities. Some countries are embracing post-NPM digital era governance (DEG) as a means of engaging with, and providing services to, members of the public. DEG was clearly evident in Ireland during the global coronavirus pandemic, with a number of councillors noting an increased openness by councillors and the executive alike to utilising online methods or hybrid models of working. At the same time, the realities and responsibility of climate change action and the required modal shifts, together with concepts of smart region, smart city and smart village, and delivering on government policy such as *Harnessing Digital* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2022) are increasingly on local authorities’ agendas. Like NPM, DEG and digitisation can engender both challenges and opportunities.

The online questionnaire explored these challenges by asking councillors about the effects their work has on various aspects of their lives and their well-being. It also asked them about barriers to councillor recruitment and retention, and these issues were further teased out in the subsequent interviews and focus groups.

The questionnaire presented a list of dimensions of personal life and well-being, and respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which being a councillor impacts on each one. Figure 4.6 presents the findings, by gender; it shows the mean score on a scale from zero (no impact) to five (high impact). The dimensions are listed here in descending order of their mean scores. Thus, as the graph shows, being a councillor has a greater impact on ‘family life’ and ‘private’ life than on the other dimensions that were included in the shortlist. Values are also above the median value in respect of the impact on a councillor’s ‘ability to earn an income’ and on his / her ‘social life’.

Figure 4.6: Extent to which being a councillor affects other aspects of life and well-being

As the bar-graph illustrates, females are more likely (than are males) to be affected by eight of the nine dimensions that were listed in the question. With the exception of 'my business', females record higher mean impact scores in all cases. As the graph (Figure 4.6) shows, the gap between genders is greatest in respect of 'my mental health' and 'my general well-being'.

With the exception of 'my business', females record higher mean impact scores in all cases. As the graph shows, the gap between genders is greatest in respect of 'my mental health' and 'my general well-being'.

Appendix D 2.1 shows that geography can have some bearing on councillors' experiences and their ability to deal with the impacts of their public lives on their private lives. Councillors in Dublin are more likely to report that being a councillor adversely affects their ability to earn an income, while councillors in the Border Region are the most likely to report impacts on their private lives.

Councillors were also invited to score their experiences of various settings and contexts – on a scale from 1 (adversarial and competitive) to 5 (always pleasant and cooperative). The following

table presents the findings, by gender. It shows that of the four settings (listed in the questionnaire), the council chamber is perceived to be the most adversarial or competitive, while dealings with senior council staff represent the most positive interfaces. The table reveals that, in each of the four settings, males have more positive perceptions than females. This gender-based differential echoes the findings presented in Figure 4.6.

The following quotes from councillors, taken from the online questionnaire, provide some insights into the scores that are presented in Table 4.2:

- "How councillors operate in terms of "playing politics" is also a factor... There is far too much currency in the antagonistic and combative approach to politics and very little room for common ground or collaboration. The next election is always a factor influencing the behaviour of local politicians";
- "I think there's still an 'old-boys-club' culture in Ireland, which makes it very hard for more diverse candidates to get mentorship, encouragement and support";

Table 4.2: Councillors' perceptions of interfaces with one another and with others – based on mean scores from 1 (adversarial and competitive) to 5 (always pleasant and cooperative)

Gender	Interfaces / Dealings / Settings			
	The Council Chamber	Dealings with lobby groups	Dealings with Government Officials	Dealings with senior council staff
Females	2.75	2.85	3.03	3.46
Males	3.05	3.08	3.13	3.57

- “Political party members continually undermine, exclude & isolate non-party and small party members. Female reps are seen as threats to some older male egotistical councillors”;
- “Try to get results from senior officials”; and
- “The CEO of LA regard us as a nuisance. CEO and Directors of Services will only accommodate TDs / Ministers. CEO will not allow us into photo shoots of tourism / housing projects etc... We are totally ignored”.

4.2.2. Councillor recruitment and retention

As noted in the literature on local government, councillor recruitment and retention can be problematic. The research questionnaire asked two open-ended questions in this regard as follows:

- What are the main barriers, if any, to councillor recruitment?
- What are the main barriers, if any, to councillor retention?

Councillors' responses are presented in the following figures – grouped by theme. As the graphs show (Figures 4.7 and 4.8), there are commonalities in respect of the factors that affect an individual's decision to stand for election and / or to remain a councillor. It should also be noted that there are some overlaps between the themes that emerged from councillors' responses across and within both questions. Councillors have heavy and growing workloads, and as noted earlier, there are increasing complexities associated with their roles. Being a councillor is time-demanding, with the result that it can be difficult to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Among those who are

self-employed, businesses can be neglected, while employees who are councillors find they eat into their annual leave in order to fulfil council duties. The following quotes (from the questionnaire also) further highlight the complex and overlapping factors that affect councillors' decision-making in respect of recruitment (standing for election) and retention.

- “Having a family (do not have a family if you want to be a councillor); Having a separate career (you will have to choose between the two eventually); Being female (it is far far harder for women to succeed in this role, for a variety of reasons, including abuse from the public being a hell of a lot nastier, in my experience); Not being retired is a blocker, as they can treat the job as a full-time role; and not being independently wealthy”.
- “For some reason, women appear to find it more difficult to enter politics. If you are otherwise gainfully employed meeting times can cause issues for the employer unless you are self-employed. Indeed, most employed councillors are self-employed or performing their duties on a full-time basis. Women don't currently vote for women, and men don't want women taking their jobs particularly if they are involved in a party”;
- “Lack of supports during an election. Lack of disability supports. Family unfriendliness. Expense”;
- “Unstructured hours; Low remuneration; Little power unlike say our counterparts in France, Germany and other EU countries. Frustration trying to deliver on small things for people and communities”;

Figure. 4.7: Perceived main barriers to councillor recruitment

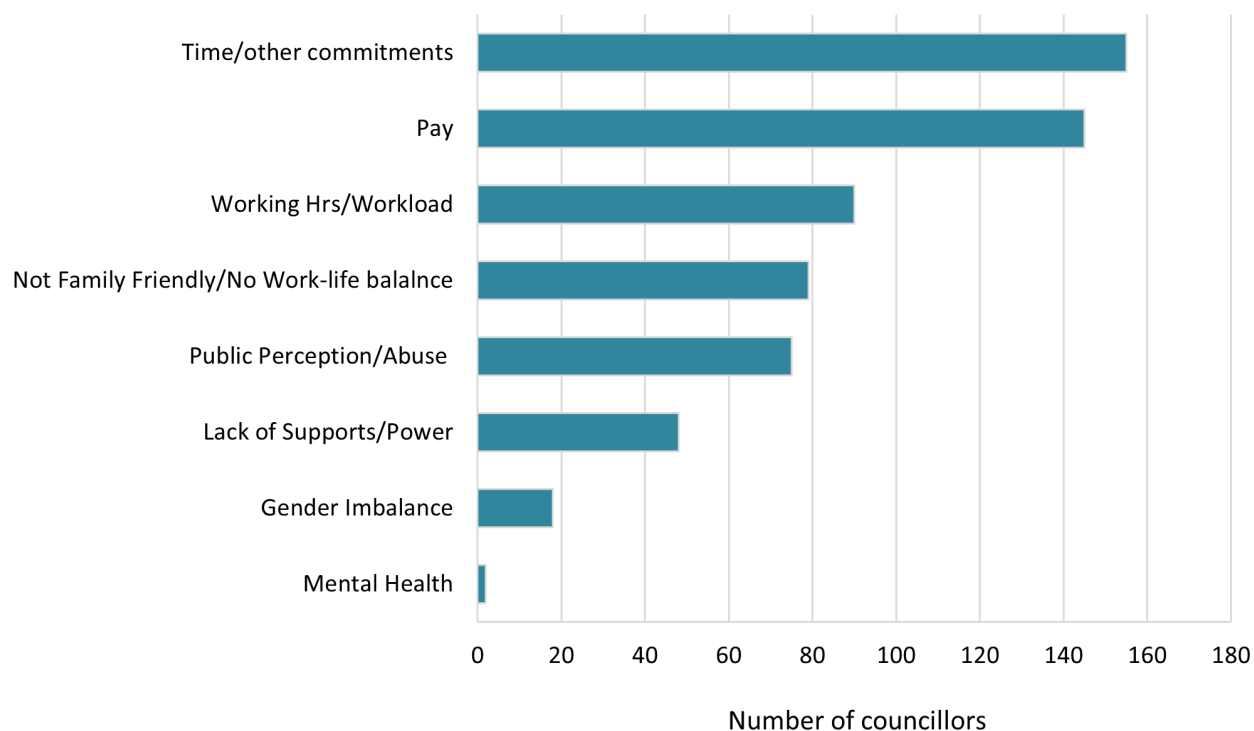
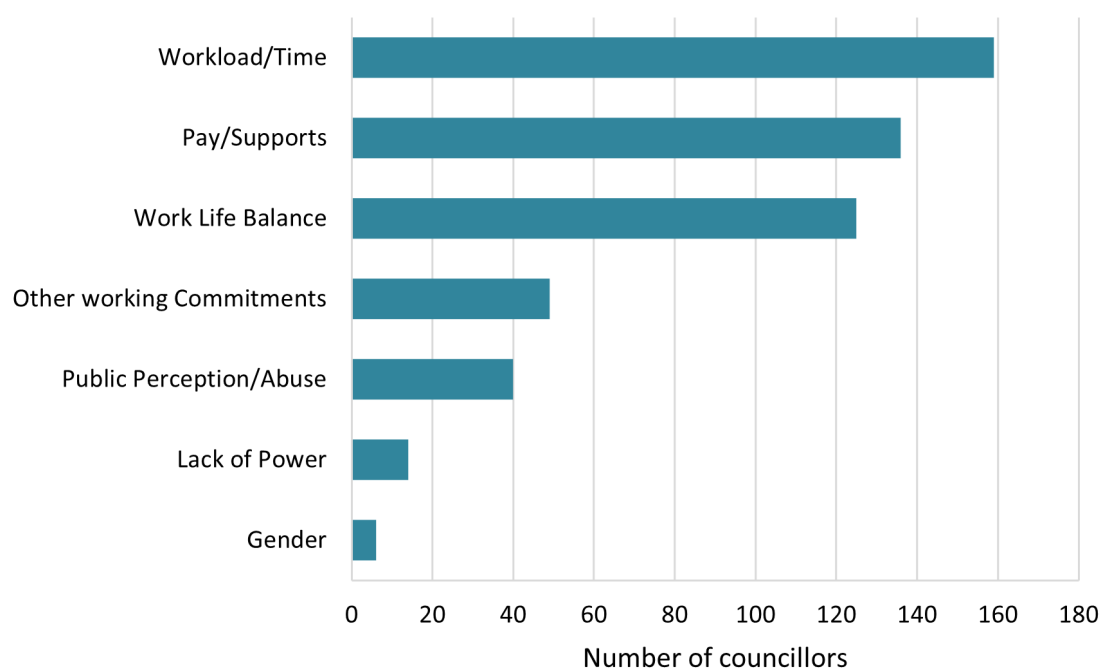


Figure 4.8: Perceived main barriers to councillor retention



- “Long hours, poor pay & conditions, little supports. Abuse on social media. Lack of progress on housing”;
- “Over-work, too many meetings, reconciling Day job with council meetings and sub-committees. lack of support for councillors from the Executive”; and
- “The role of a councillor has changed since I was elected in 2014, people expect more from you and for you to be on call 24/7; it is so hard to switch off and our powers are very limited which makes our role more difficult”.

The interviews and focus groups provided spaces in which to further explore the challenges facing councillors and to discuss how such challenges might be overcome. An increase in online abuse and fear for personal safety was highlighted as a growing concern. The following remarks sum up many councillors’ experiences and sentiments:

- “...what worries me going into the next couple of years, as we’re facing into an election is I have had some like very nasty messages, not via social media, but actually via email. And I do worry about being a target for more of that in the future. Like, you know, wishing ill on me and my family, that kind of thing. And I think that’s going to be... that worries me much more than feeling like I’m bad at my job some days, but you know, it’s, that’s very difficult” (Councillor 23).
- “...in social media there’s no respect for anybody. And it it...it can be hurtful at times... people try to set you up. So you’re always on watch that you’re, you’re being targeted. And you find it disconcerting that your, I suppose, private life has been interfered in in so many ways...I always knew they would be a cost in some way” (Councillor 11).

As noted in the presentation of the online questionnaire findings, geography can have a bearing on how councillors do their work, and several interviewees (both urban and rural) remarked that rural councillors spend more time travelling to meetings with citizens and communities than is the case among urban councillors. Thus, their work-life balance and economic well-being are more likely to suffer. As one rural councillor observed, “A city councillor has no planning to do. A city councillor can hold down a job the whole time, because their meetings

are at 6 o’clock in the evening or something like that. A city councillor can always, in Dublin and Cork, especially, be a councillor without owning a car. Take that into account... but. I would have to change my car every three years; have to; with the condition of the roads and considering the mileage, I do” (Councillor 20). Meanwhile, a Dublin-based councillor remarked, with respect to a party-colleague who is based in a rural county: “The distances he has to travel for council meetings, as well as for party meetings, I could walk, he can’t. The range of demands on a rural councillor, whether it is the country road or the housing... the demands are much, much greater in a rural area: the range of issues and obviously, depending on the area, as well, the capability of people to be able to deal with them. I think the demands of the party as well in a rural area are much greater because you’ve further distances to travel” (Councillor 27).

4.2.3. Councillor remuneration

Remuneration (pay) features strongly in the debate on recruitment and retention. The following quotations from councillors, as recorded in the questionnaire, are emblematic of their sentiments in this regard:

- “Too much work with no security and poor pay”;
- “Income and ability to work outside of role while still giving sufficient commitment to councillor role”;
- “Time. Inability to earn a living wage by being a councillor”;
- “The expectations of work required based on the longstanding ‘full time’ councillors’ work”;
- “It is more of a vocation than a job. There are no set hours in terms of when, where and how constituents can contact you. It can be almost 24/7”;
- “Time off to attend official meetings and functions. You’re never asked if that suits you, your just told when it’s on”;
- “When the reality of the expectation within the role meets the reality of the remuneration, we lose a huge cohort of potential Councillors”; and

- “I have been 23 years continuously a councillor. As the saying goes, I am proud to have served my Council and constituents, however on reflection of my time and potential earnings lost, it has been a selfish act in relation to my family. That is my biggest regret”.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, remuneration was consistently identified as a challenge, with several contributors stating that councillors were receiving part-time wages for a full-time job. While contributors welcomed the salary increases that have occurred in recent years, they stated that the core level of remuneration remains inadequate. An increase in online abuse and fear for personal safety was also highlighted as a growing concern. The following remarks sum up many councillors' experiences and sentiments:

- “I worked full-time as a councillor, which is less than minimum wage, for like six or seven years. That would have been around 16 grand at the time, and subsequently got married and have a child. So it's impossible, absolutely impossible to live on that as a full-time wage. Albeit it does take full time hours. I'm very lucky and very fortunate that I work for the [name of employer] now, which has flexi-time, and they allow unpaid leave to attend council meeting” (Councillor 17^{xxvii}).
- “You could have weeks that you just get consumed by it, and that, and because the timings.... if you're working during the day, you're consumed by it early in the morning or late in the evening, which has a huge impact on family life and work life balance where it becomes near impossible and it's not fair...and it's not fair on your family” (Councillor 32).
- “But there, the genuine councillors out there that are working hard, putting in a lot of hours, a lot of time. I don't know how you reward them” (Councillor 36).
- “I see a difficulty with people going into local politics, even national politics, now because the demands are so great. And I think you couldn't do it on a part-time basis” (Councillor 25).
- “So I'm actually in a position where I may have to give this up next year, because I can't afford to live on the councillor's salary, but I can't do the full-time work and a part-time work and still remain sane” (Focus Group 05).

4.2.4. The Councillor's power base

Councillors also expressed frustrations with the local government system itself, including with the lack of power councillors have and their inability to affect systemic and institutional change. Many were critical of council management, central government and political parties. A number of councillors referenced that it took them up to twelve months following their election or co-option to fully understand how council works and what is possible; with one councillor recounting, “it took me probably nine months to a year to understand how the council worked in the first place...I suppose for any first-time councillor it's, kind of, the same. So you kind of learn how it works. And then, I suppose you start to become quite frustrated with how it works... (Councillor 02) Long-serving councillors were overwhelmingly of the view that their powers have been eroded over recent decades. As noted by one respondent to the online questionnaire,



That Councillors have final say on certain matters, such as County Development Plan, which has been devolved for final decision to Planning Regulator. Makes the Councillors' role pointless! ”

The following remarks sum up the views of many councillors:

- “If you want something answered by the Executive, and if you're putting in emails and you're getting ... ‘Ask on the day,’ do you know? And it does, and it does lend itself to publicity in one way, you know, but that's the nature of the game” (Councillor 10).
- “But in terms of big picture development around energy, education, digital: it's all silo-ed it's very, very, very difficult to plan ahead. ...But are we modernising for the future with the local government system? We aren't no” (Councillor 22).
- “Like it was actually at a point where I had to, at a meeting of the chamber and the team, state that I believe the function of the Director was to ensure that the Part 8 was carried out to the letter of the law. And they were saying, ‘well are you saying that I'm not doing that?’ and I'm

saying 'that it isn't happening'.... So it became very hostile. And it's very hard to come back from that to rebuild relationships, but you just move on in a different way" (Councillor 30).

- "And then kind of artificial time pressures: "you have to decide this today", you know. So something might have taken three years to come to us and we have to decide it on the day. That, that kind of stuff isn't good" (Councillor 08).
- "But I've learned very quickly that it's the Executive that makes the decisions. And I've seen stuff coming back to us six months later with a word changed and put in front of us again" (Councillor 29).
- "Our power is going every day of the week... Our county development plan now is the plan of the Regulator. So we may as well not be there at all, at all. He's dictating what we should put into our plan. It's nice to get directives and be guided by them, but you shouldn't have to live by them" (Councillor 20).
- "So really, we're trying to meet these targets at local government, because they're fitting, trying to fit into national government strategies or guidelines, but they're not actually... they're not representative, I suppose, of what the community wants or what the area wants. So there might be more areas in the country that would be better suited to maybe like increasing their, their targets, and maybe reducing our counties or vice versa" (Councillor 12).
- "Something like Bus Connects is really important because it's substantial change; people assume that that's something that the local authority would have significant influence on their..., that's not really because that goes straight into An Bord Pleanála - so it even bypasses the local authority as a planning body. And the only real influence we have is through the public consultation, like everyone else, which is frustrating, but also quite humbling" (Councillor 07).

There is significant and growing frustration of what is regarded as a blurring of the boundaries between the remit of a councillor and that of a TD (see Chapter 2, specifically section 2.2.2). This blurring of the roles, many would argue, is contributing to the misunderstanding amongst many citizens of what is actually within the remit of a councillor

related to this, a lack of outcry when local powers are withdrawn or taken back into the centre. The following quotations sum up the views of many councillors:

- "I have great respect for TDs and senators, I really do..., but once they get into, into Leinster House, the local authority is very quickly forgotten. And they realise they can do the role of a local authority elected rep. from Leinster House, why would they give away that connection with the voter? And I think that's, that's the link that a lot of people don't want to break. And in my opinion, it's destroying local government" (Councillor 32).
- "you think about all the jokes about why particular TDs keep getting re-elected and the joke is 'well, they fix the road'. But they don't fix the road; the county council fixes the road.... we have all these kinds of myths about...the local TD is putting something through your mailbox explaining how she got it spent in this particular way – and she didn't because the county council did that...it's incredible how much, not exactly misinformation, but how those boundaries get blurred at every single opportunity" (Councillor 23).
- "I'd like to see a divestment back in spite of everything that's been said, actually come back to us. And, and probably a greater demarcation between the roles of TDs and Councillors... in what I would loosely describe as the German/ Scandinavian countries that they have that kind of demarcation between, you know, parliamentarians and local council people, and they actually know and appreciate what the roles and functions are" (Councillor 14).

The challenge for government as a result of this blurring of boundaries is also recognised outside of formal local / central government with one analyst noting "at the end of the day, most TDs get elected because of the work the councillors around them do, and because of the hand-holding the councillors undertake" (Relevant External Actor F).

The social class composition of council areas can also present complexities and challenges for councillors. Those who represent rural and working-class constituencies are more likely to have to deal with housing issues than are councillors whose constituencies are more affluent, and as noted earlier, housing is the single issue that most frustrates councillors (see previous section, 4.1).

4.2.5. Gender in the council chamber

Gender emerged strongly as one of the most significant challenges facing current and would-be councillors. Several women reported experiencing misogyny and discrimination on the basis of their gender, and they recounted instances in which fellow councillors and council officials spoke and / or behaved inappropriately to them. The following statements from councillors provide a representative cross-section of many women's experiences:

- “Going into the council was a complete shock. I mean, I've been called the name of another - there's only [number] female county councillors - on several occasions, I've been referred to, in the chamber, by another name. I've seen another councillor being referred to as another name of another councillor, her name been mispronounced, and she's over 10 years on the council” (Councillor 24).
- “I've gotten a lot of queries over this past year from women who are in very difficult situations, facing homelessness. And I think they've come to me specifically because I'm a woman, and you know, I can talk to them about their, you know, help them, or they feel like I help them, a little bit more of, a more of a listening ear. And so I've had a few of those kinds of cases. And I've had people contact me who are fleeing domestic violence and things like that. And again, you know, I'm happy to help because that's part of the role. But I think, yeah, it's because I'm a woman, the funny thing about like public events and showing up to public events, and I get invited to a lot, and quite often, and this happened on a few occasions, when I show up to something, people don't realise I'm a councillor, because they don't know what I look like, or they don't expect me to be a woman or something (Focus Group 04).
- “And so another thing is, is the cost for me. And the pay, you know, being a councillor as part time with a part time salary, I'm still trying to juggle trying to make it work financially for myself, because I was working full time, I had to give it up because I was in the public service to become a councillor. And that meant dropping wages. But I was looking at, you know, the impact, the non-financial impact of, you know, having this, this rule, so. I'm being fed spiritually and mentally at the moment, or so obviously, if it continues to be a problem. And then if you want to get another job to kind of bridge the gap, then you're going to not be as available as you can be as a full-time councillor. And again, when we come into the home then after work, the majority of the role in the home falls on the woman, so you nearly have a full-time job as a mom, and the partner and the wife, a full-time job as a councillor because being a councillor is a full-time job. You might be paid part time, but you're certainly a full-time worker. And then if you want to have another job, so it's a huge challenge for women. Another one is time, especially timing of council meetings” (Focus Group 03).
- “And it's all men up there. And definitely, when you ask a question about something that maybe you just haven't got the grip of it. It's a kind of... there's a kind of, like a sigh from the Executive, and then they answer you in the best possible way. But there's that thing 'oh, look it, you're a woman, and you're asking a question” (Focus Group 03).
- “On top of that, it always has been a man's club, a boys' club; it has been. You know, politics is changing. It's great to see that maternity leave has been brought in for our TDs at a national level and starting to come in now at a local level... And on top of that, you do have a level of discrimination as a woman. You have, and aye, there are certain words that just set me off and they are quite derogatory, vicious, horrible words to describe a woman... On top of that you do, I would do an awful lot of house visits. You have to take care. You don't know whose house you're going into. You're meeting people for the first time (Councillor 10).
- “If people are hearing that women are resigning or aren't joining in the first place, because there's no supports there, that's going to put off a lot of people. And as I mentioned certain, people with certain careers could never consider being a councillor. They don't have the flexibility in their job” (Former Councillor 01).

4.2.6. Diversity in the council chamber

As noted in Chapter 3, the demographic profile of Ireland's local authority members is considerably more homogenous than the voting population. Women, young people and members of ethnic minorities are among the cohorts who are most visibly under-represented in council chambers. As the questionnaire results have shown, most councillors would welcome greater diversity in their membership. The literature review (Chapter 2) notes that, in many jurisdictions, policy-makers have introduced measures, such as gender quotas, to make council chambers more diverse. In order to explore experiences of councillors from minority cohorts and to garner their views on increasing diversity, this research convened five focus groups – two with councillors who are members of ethnic minorities, two with female councillors and one with first-time councillors.

Like their colleagues, these cohorts of councillors reported that their primary role is to represent their communities, and they see their representative role as underpinning their legislative / statutory roles. While the focus group participants see themselves as representing the entire community (at least those who vote for them), they also report that their gender and / or ethnicity gives them insights into others' life experiences, and they have an affinity with particular constituents. Several female councillors reported that by virtue of being a woman, they are more likely than their male colleagues to be approached about social policy issues and by families and individuals who are experiencing traumas or life crises. Similarly, councillors who are members of ethnic minorities report that migrants are more likely to approach them than other councillors, but they attributed this pattern, to some extent, to their own profiles among migrant communities and through cultural organisations.

All three cohorts of councillors referred to 'glass ceilings' in the local government system, and they advocated specific steps that would enable the recruitment of more young, female and ethnic minority candidates and their retention as councillors. As one female councillor noted "I'm an intelligent person. I'm ambitious...I get things done. I don't see, I see myself limited now. I don't see myself progressing in the role as a councillor. I don't see how anymore I can contribute over what I have. I want to contribute, and I know I can contribute.

And I know I have the capabilities. But that doesn't necessarily mean I want to be a TD...And so the likes of me, and a lot of my colleagues who come from professional backgrounds, leave local politics because it's, it's a glass ceiling, you have nowhere to go" (Councillor 13). The majority of female councillors are supportive of gender quotas, but they also point to the importance of training, for (would-be) candidates and councillors. Those who had experience of SHE and women's caucuses spoke very favourably of the supports and guidance they received; they noted that these initiatives have given them the self-confidence that is required to be a councillor, and they referred to the cross-party solidarity they have engendered. Female councillors emphasised that gender equality norms should apply in all places in which councillors do their work, so that there is zero-tolerance of sexism, however implicit, indirect or unintentional it may be. They also noted the need to increase funding for the women's caucuses and for SHE, and to extend their work and influence into the wider civil society.

The members of ethnic minorities referred to civil society bodies such as the PPNs as offering a platform or conduit through which migrants can become more involved in local decision-making and come to the attention of political parties. They all referred to the importance of political parties in enabling them to acquire know-how and develop their skills as public representatives; albeit there was a consistent message that political parties need to do more in terms of on-going supports once candidates are elected. They also noted the importance of training, similar to the work being done by SHE, and they recommended that candidates and councillors from ethnic minorities be involved in delivering such training. As one councillor recommended,

“

Sometimes people need to hear from the people who've had the experience for them to actually understand, because the experience is different, completely different from your regular Irish candidate (Focus Group 02). ”

Councillors noted that some, but not all, local authorities have up-to-date migrant integration strategies in place, and they referred to the importance of civic leadership, in migrant communities, in enabling migrants to come forward and assume roles in participative and representative democracy. They pointed to the need to understand migrants' experiences, including the reluctance some may have to go to a Garda station (due to bad experiences of police forces in their countries of origin) to register to vote.

The first-time councillors echoed the sentiments and experiences of the other focus group participants, and their observations also resonated with the young councillors who had participated in one-to-one interviews. They underscored the countries of origin) to register to vote.

The first-time councillors echoed the sentiments and experiences of the other focus group participants, and their observations also resonated with the young councillors who had participated in one-to-one interviews. They underscored the importance of providing childcare (either on-site and / or as an expense that can be re-imbursed or subsidised), maternity, paternity and respite leave. One councillor recounted,

“

The first day I went into the Chamber, I had no babysitter. And my daughter was only four months old at the time. So I actually brought her in with me, and it didn't even occur to me that it wouldn't be okay to bring her in”

(Focus Group 05). ”

First-time elected members reported that while they had been advised of the large workloads councillors have, they were not fully prepared to deal with the volume and range of tasks; as one observed, “I think I didn't realise before, I getting in, how broad the role of the councillor is, how much time it would require, how much stress will come with it, how much work would need to be done. And once I got in, I realised this was more than a part-time job.... It would be more stressful than I had envisaged in the first place... you are working 24/7, and people expect you to be prompt... and you have to deal with the council staff who have a 9 to 5 job, more or less” (Focus Group 02). Similar to

most other councillors, they expressed frustrations at the length of time between decisions being taken and projects being realised, and their lack of power to influence change. Specifically, they spoke about the implications being a councillor has had on their professional careers, including not having the time to up-skill and seek promotion, and they reported that their peers and friends are advancing their careers, while they, as councillors, remain on the same rung of the professional ladder. One councillor remarked, “Taking a five-year gap out of your career just kills your career... if you say, ‘I'll do it for one term’, your career is dead” (Focus Group 05)

4.2.7. Summary Remarks

The data presented in this section reveal that the main challenges councillors experience are associated with low pay – particularly considering the long and unsociable hours most of them work. Achieving a work-life balance is particularly challenging, and this factor is inhibiting councillor retention and candidate recruitment. Councils continue to exhibit a lack of diversity (relative to Irish society), and the biases experienced by female councillors are deeply problematic in respect of dignity-at-work and the functioning of democracy. Councillors also perceive challenges associated with their limited and declining decision-making powers and the ways in which local authorities tend to operate.

4.3. Implications of Reforms and Reconfigurations

Key Messaging

- While acknowledging that most councillors are members of the political parties that introduced legislative changes, there are low levels of support, among councillors, for many of the recent systemic reforms, especially the *2014 Local Government (Reform) Act*.
- Uisce Éireann (Irish Water) and the abolition of town councils are generally perceived to have been the most problematic changes.
- Most councillors welcome the formation of municipal districts (MDs), and as the next section (of this report) shows, they would like to see their MDs (or the equivalents i.e. ACs in the Dublin local authorities) having more powers.
- There are mixed views regarding collaborative and participative democracy structures and their outputs, but as other strands of this report show, most councillors welcome moves towards increased diversity and inclusion

As noted in Chapter 3, Ireland's local government system has a narrower functional remit, fewer legislative powers, larger local government units and a lower ratio of councillors to citizens than is the case in most OECD countries. Since the 1990s, there have been some reforms and reconfigurations, and one of the most significant pieces of legislation was the *Local Government (Reform) Act 2014*. Unlike previous reforms in which legislative changes were preceded by a Green Paper (1996 and 2008) to promote public debate and inputs from councillors, and a White Paper (policy statement), the 2014 Act was preceded by a White Paper only, such that councillors, among other stakeholders, had a truncated time in which to shape and influence the legislation. In that context, this research represents an opportunity to systematically gather councillors' perceptions of the 2014 legislation among other reforms. This section provides an experienced-based and retrospective lens on the implementation of the 2014 Act and subsequent changes in Ireland's local government system, while Section 4.4 presents councillors' views on possible future reforms and innovations

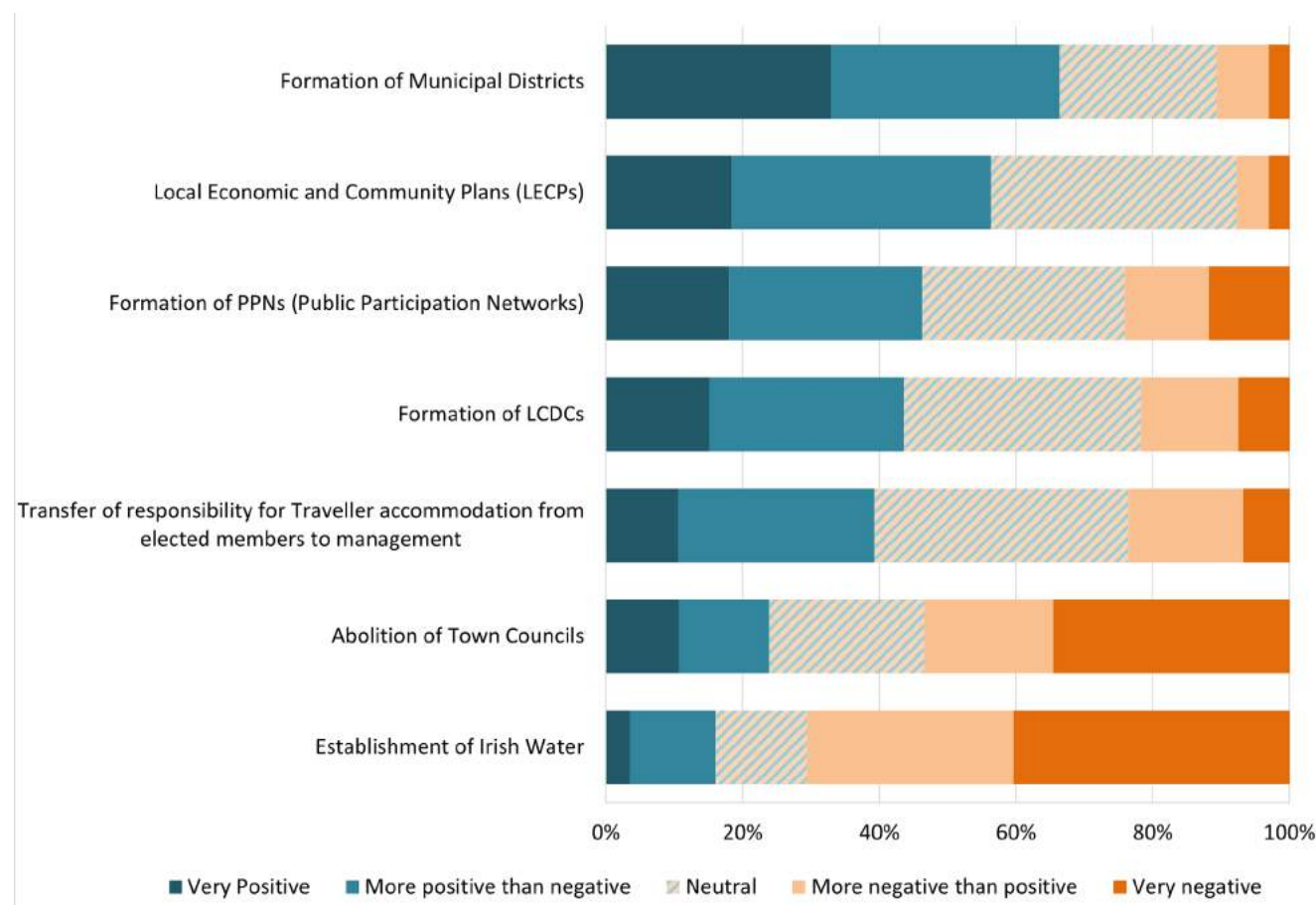
4.3.1. Perceptions of the Local Government Reform Act 2014

Figure 4.9 lists seven changes that have taken place in Irish local government over recent

years. Six of these have resulted directly from the aforementioned 2014 Act, while the other i.e. removal of responsibility for Traveller accommodation, which pre-dates the Act, has been included here, as it represented the removal of a particular responsibility from councillors^{xxviii}.

As Figure 4.9 shows, the majority of councillors have positive perceptions of the formation of municipal districts (MDs) and of the formulation and implementation of local economic and community plans (LECPs). In their comments, councillors noted that MDs (rather than cities or counties) better enable councillors to focus on local issues, and several stated that they would like to see more powers being exercised at the municipal level. The online questionnaire findings also reveal a largely positive perception of LECPs, and councillors remarked that they value the community engagement associated with these. Some also noted the linkages between LECPs, public participation networks (PPNs) and councils' local community development committees (LCDCs). As one councillor observed, the "LCDC when run well is a structure that is representative of all stakeholders and has strong accountability measures for the delivery of its functions." Another said of the LCDC, "it operates as an a-political space, with an excellent mix of professionals, sector experts, councillors, Council Exec and PPN."

Figure 4.9: Councillors' perceptions of councillors' recent reforms and reconfigurations of Ireland' local government system



The online questionnaire findings show that less than a quarter of councillors have a positive perception of the abolition of town councils, and over half of them have a negative perception thereof. Their views are more negative again in respect of the establishment of Irish Water (now Uisce Éireann); seventy percent of councillors have a negative perception of the utility company. They see its formation as a further erosion of local authorities' powers, and some expressed frustrations about the increased distance between councillors and those who make decisions about water services. One councillor (via the questionnaire) was particularly strident in conveying their opinion:

“

The relevant engineers and decision makers live in shadows behind a convoluted helpline and tokenistic councillor engagement that is designed to make it harder for elected members to access actual decision makers. An extremely frustrating part of the role. There is no reason why relevant councils could not have direct access to the relevant senior managers / decision makers for relevant areas and have relationships with them as opposed to the Chinese Wall that they have developed. ”

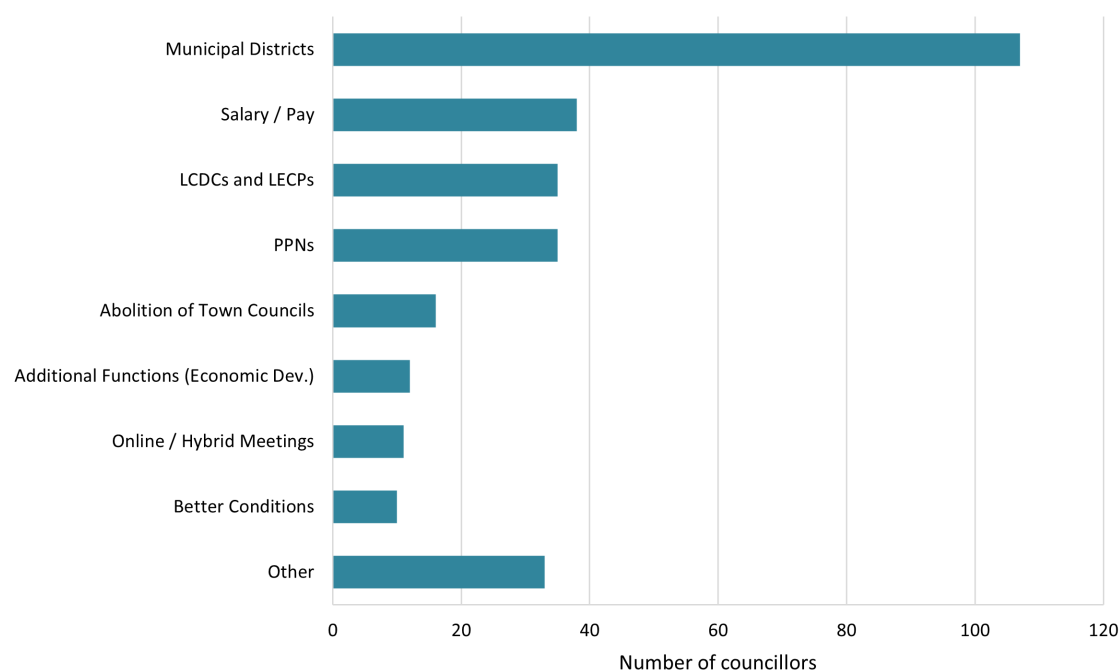
Figure 4.10: Most positive recent reforms in Irish local government – thematic analysis

Figure 4.9 presents data that were collated using a Likert scale (from very positive to very negative), and this question was followed by two open-ended questions in which respondents were asked to identify the most positive and most negative reforms over recent years. Figures 4.10 and 4.11 summarise their responses further, and they illustrate a high level of consistency with responses to the previous question. As these figures show,

- The formation of MDs is the reform that is most frequently cited as the most positive; and
- The abolition of town councils is the reform that is most frequently cited as being the most negative.

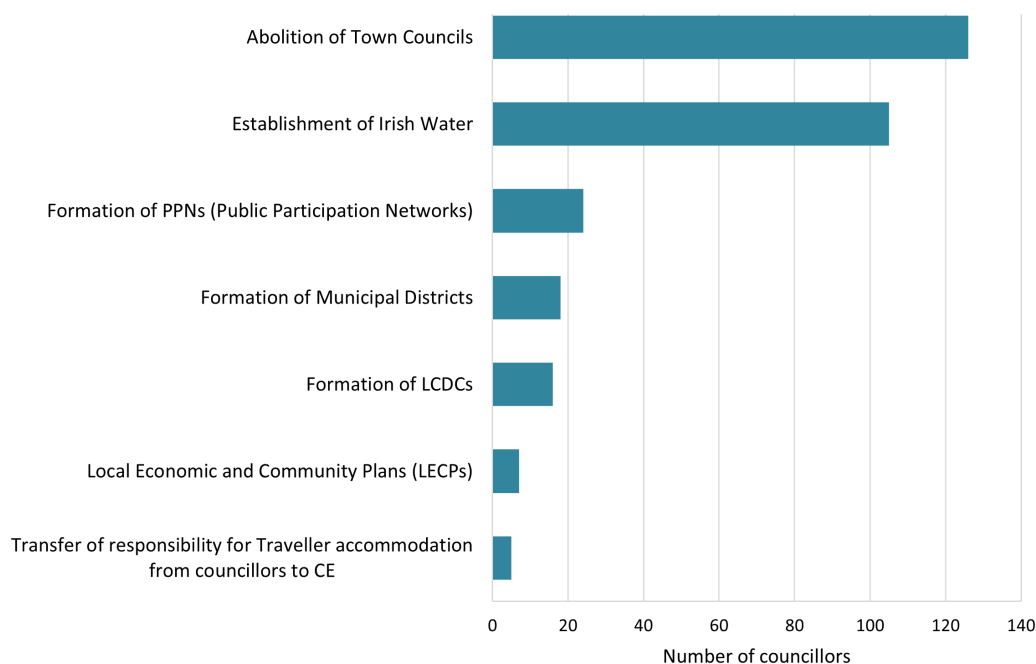
Almost one in eight councillors referred to the pay increase they have received, since 2017, as the most positive reform they have witnessed, although several of them remarked that this is a ‘first step’, rather than the end of the process. As Figure 4.10 also shows, some councillors referenced the LCDC, PPN and LEC all of which bring councillors into collective decision-making structures along with civil society bodies.

Among the other positive reforms mentioned by small numbers (<10) of councillors were the Moorhead Report (linked to increased pay), the local property tax and the abolition of town councils, which they noted treats all citizens more equally^{xxix}. Fewer than five councillors mentioned Irish Water.

As Figure 4.11 shows, the abolition of town councils and the establishment of Uisce Éireann are most frequently cited as negatives (among recent changes to the local government system). Smaller numbers of councillors referred to PPNs, LECs and LCDs, and they questioned the merits of councillors having to share power with non-elected persons. A small number also perceive the formation of MDs in negative terms, mainly because they would prefer to have seen the retention of town councils. A geographical analysis of the findings shows that opposition to the abolition of town councils is strongest outside of Dublin.

Although they were not specifically asked to comment on the reforms, some councillors did so, and the issues they raised were further explored in the interviews and focus groups. Among the comments from councillors, stated in their questionnaire responses, which were subsequently echoed in the interviews, were the following:

- “Model of Local Government in Ireland does not work anymore for councillors or the public. Elected local members are being superseded by quangos and officialdom!”, and
- “I believe citizens have no idea about what the role of a councillor is. I had little idea until I became a councillor. A lot of the time I am treated like a post box for the council or central government, passing messages back and forth between them and citizens”.

Figure 4.11: Most negative recent reforms in Irish local government – thematic analysis

While these are not criticisms of the 2014 Act per se, they are indicative of sentiments among councillors that reforms and reconfigurations of the local government system have not focused sufficiently on councillors' needs and the potential roles they could play. These issues were explored in the interviews and focus groups, and as the following quotes indicate, councillors are concerned about what they perceive to be an erosion in the powers of local authorities, a reduction in democratic representation and the transfer of powers to non-elected entities, which they perceive to be less accountable than local authorities. While the 2014 legislation is the focus of much of their criticisms, they believe that the processes of erosion have been underway for several decades, regardless of which parties are in power at national level.

- “I think the 2014 Act really had a detrimental impact on councillors... history says, you know, there was, there was faults there. But I don't think we're struck the balance as yet, and I think if you want to get people from all sectors of society involved in local politics, you're going to have to widen the powers to create a responsibility and a collective buy-in” (Councillor 13).
- “The people now see, the services have diminished since our town councils were abolished, and I'm not being parochial... if they really want to do cost saving, they should have formed borough councils that I mentioned, ran in the same way as your town council”
- “I'm worried about the kind of, the stripping back of powers and things like that. I worry about things like the kind of, the relationship between the OPR and the councils. I don't like the whole idea of, like, people we don't know, making decisions. Like, I don't like the whole idea that we're not collaborating on something, or you don't meet some people that are making decisions on decisions you make. I worry about that. So OPR... I also worry about the An Bord Pleanála” (Councillor 22).
- “Powers have been taken away from local authorities in terms of responsibility for, for directly providing the services, and there's been a setting-up of parallel and less accountable, less democratic structures as well, which I don't think has helped.... And the HSE has created further distance, again, Irish Water would be a further example, in the sense that water had been an integral part of local authorities' functions and roles. And now there is a distant, less accountable, less democratic party set up to do that. And housing... now we're left to the wiles of the market. And the ability to intervene at a more direct level doesn't exist. So I think they're all negative moves and directions that Irish governments have followed over the last 20 years” (Councillor 06).

- “Since I was first elected, we have had the regional health boards abolished and replaced with the HSE. Issues like roads, national primary routes and so on, that’s been... removed from local governments. We had the abolition of the Vocational Education Committees... [The] county council was responsible for the issuing of the student grants for third level students and regional colleges and universities and again, that was taken from us. New groups, new quangos established. We had the removing of domestic refuse service from, from local government. Again, it was a significant issue in terms of local politics. Waste management plans, they were taken from us. And then more recently, we had the removal of the water services to Irish Water, another quango. Many of the planning functions that we had when I got elected first, are gone. Even in terms of determining annual budgets, again, not that we had a huge amount of power, it just was curtailed over the years. And even smaller items like issuing driving license from the council offices, another quango has been established to issue drivers’ licenses. You know, it’s just incredible the, I suppose, the role of councils and councillors has been diminished - there’s no doubt about that. And then of course, to top it all, we had the abolition in 2014, of all that urban tier of local government, and then not only a reduction in the number of councils but also a reduction in the number of councillors... So in terms of just representation, it’s, again, it’s at odds with everything else in Europe. So we’re reduced the number of councils and the number of councillors. So they know the power that we did have, even though there wasn’t a huge amount of power, it has been reduced further, it has been transferred to County Managers and Chief Executives, and it’s been transferred to quangos and groups... even like the CCMA, the City and County Managers Association, they have a huge amount of power and authority, and it’s not good. Like, we don’t have a great record in terms of expanding or improving our local government system” (Councillor 09).
- “[The 2014 Act] drove a coach and four, through local governance and reduced, got rid of Town Councils, which are a healthy thing to have, and reduced the number of councillors in the country” (Councillor 14).
- “The only reason we have regional assemblies is to comply with the European Union. If we compare what we have, the comparison

between that and a regional assembly in Austria is that they actually have legislative, legislation-making powers in Austria at a regional assembly level. I mean, at local government’ or regional assembly level here, we really only have consultation powers. It’s not much more than that. So it’s watered down” (Councillor 26).

Yet, as previously highlighted and noted in the interview responses, councillors also welcome some of the recent changes, particularly the establishment of MDs, as the following quotes indicate:

- “...the one thing that did help was the Municipal District. Some councils are very much against it but at least when we go to a Municipal meeting, we’re talking about our own area, and we haven’t to listen about something in [TOWN A] or in [TOWN B] that has no relevance to us” (Councillor 37^{xxx}).
- “But the Municipal District means that you can really drill down; there’s just six of us within it and you can, you can really see results within your area like” (Councillor 30).
- “It’s going the right direction. I mean, the Municipal Districts, setting up Municipal Districts, having General Municipal Allocations, having a Municipal District budget, those things are all good. But it doesn’t go far enough. Because so much of what we do is localised. I go into council meetings, and we... county council meetings really should only be about stuff that benefits the whole county, but most of what we do is localised stuff, roads, the tourism stuff, all that, you know, beaches, harbours, town enhancements, that should only be happening at Municipal District level. So our Municipal Districts meet every month now, that’s a decision we made early on. But I would frontload powers and responsibilities to Municipal Districts” (Councillor 18).

The questionnaire included a question for elected members of Tipperary County Council, Limerick City & County Council and Waterford City & County Council. They were asked how they viewed the amalgamations that had resulted in the formation of their local authorities. The findings indicate mixed views; just over a third (34%) of councillors have a positive perception of the amalgamations, while almost half (48%) have a negative perception of thereof. The remainder (18%) report being neutral on the matter.

4.3.2. Summary Remarks

The data presented in this section demonstrate low levels of support for the reform and restructuring that has taken place in Ireland's local government system over recent decades, and there is considerable dissatisfaction with the provisions and outworking of the 2014 legislation. The recent reforms and reconfigurations are perceived to have increased central government's control over local government and to have further reduced the power of the councillor. While the questionnaire findings are generally negative, there are some positive pointers with respect to the formation of local structures, most notably municipal districts.



4.4. Possible Innovations

Key Messaging

- There is strong support for the recent moves towards more family-friendly practices and a desire to see further moves in this regard.
- Ensuring councillors retain the powers they have and acquire new ones ought to shape decision-making in respect of directly elected mayors and any other possible innovations or reforms.
- Most councillors favour greater Europeanisation of the Irish local government system, and they want to see decentralisation of functions from the central to the local level.
- While there is strong support for efforts to increase diversity among councillors and to encourage more young people and women to stand for election, a majority of male councillors and a sizeable minority of female councillors oppose gender quotas.
- The vast majority of councillors would oppose any further amalgamations of local authorities, and most would oppose any reduction in the number of councillors.

Systems of sub-national government in all democracies are subject to institutional, systemic and legislative changes. In the UK, during the 2000s, there was an increase in the number of councils having directly elected mayors (DEMs), and in 2019 the people of Limerick voted in favour of having a DEM, while citizens in Cork and Waterford rejected the notion. In February 2023, the Dublin Citizens' Assembly presented the Irish Government with its final report and recommendations in respect of the role and responsibilities of Dublin's mayor, and the Assembly's work cites experiences of mayoral offices in other European cities. Steps have been taken to make Ireland's local authorities more diverse and inclusive, and maternity and paternity leave schemes are now in place. *The Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012* introduced gender quotas (>30% of candidates have to be female in order for political parties to qualify for State funding) for Dáil elections. As of February 2023, the quota has increased to 40%. *The Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality (2021)* recommended that gender quotas for party candidates should extend to local, Seanad and European Elections, and the Assembly also recommended that the quota should be increased from 30% to 40% for both women and men. Gender quotas are already in place for local authorities in several jurisdictions, including France and Finland, and female councillor networks have been important promoters of gender

in several jurisdictions, including France and Finland, and female councillor networks have been important promoters of gender equality and equal opportunities in many countries (Pini and McDonald, 2011).

As noted in Chapter 2, local government systems in all democracies are continually evolving and local government stakeholders frequently look at experiences in other jurisdictions when considering if or how to reform their own systems. Through their participation in transnational / inter-jurisdictional projects and their involvement in EU and Council of Europe Networks (e.g., Committee of the Regions), local authorities learn from one another, and there is a constant sharing of information and experiences among local government actors. Political scientists, geographers, sociologists and others who study political systems often put forward proposals for local government reform and restructuring. Ideas and innovations also emerge from media commentators and discussion platforms as well as from civil society and think tanks. This research has provided an opportunity to gauge councillors' perceptions of reforms and innovations, some of which are already in the pipeline and are due to come into place and some of which appear to be at a remove.

Drawing on the international literature and public discourse about local government in Ireland, the online questionnaire presented councillors with a shortlist of possible innovations and / or reforms, and it invited them to indicate the extent to which they would either welcome or oppose each one. As Figure 4.12 shows, over two-thirds of councillors would warmly welcome the following:

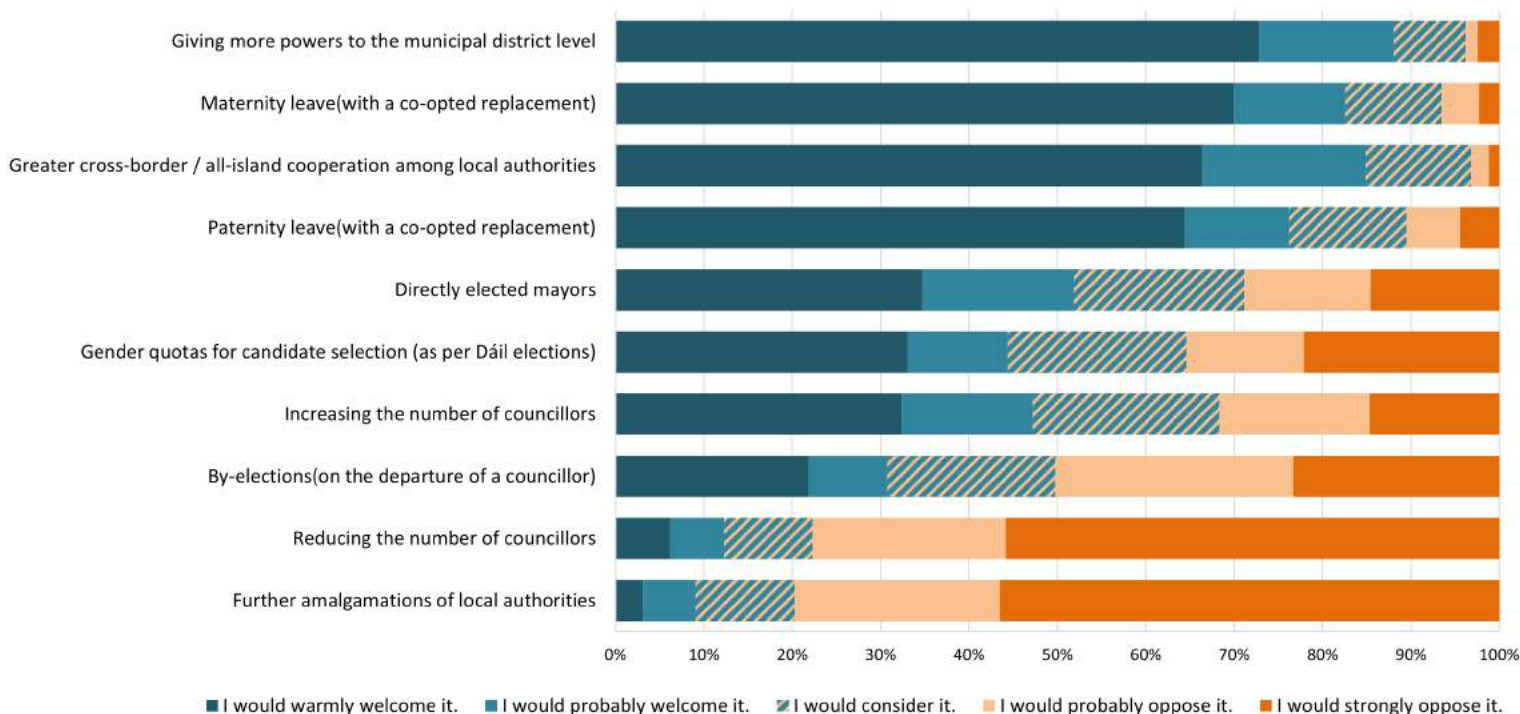
- Giving more power to the municipal district level;
- Maternity leave with a co-opted replacement; and
- Greater cross-border / all-island cooperation among local authorities.

Almost all of the remaining councillors would welcome each of these three changes.

4.4.1. Recent innovations

Since this online questionnaire was administered, councillors can avail of protections afforded by the *Maternity Protection Act 1994 (as amended)* including 6-months maternity leave with the option of either co-opting a replacement or seeking administrative support. The scheme also covers councillors who may become absent due to illness. The questionnaire results indicate widespread support for a maternity leave scheme, and this support transcends gender, geography and length of service. The results also reveal that almost ninety percent of councillors would welcome a paternity leave scheme^{xxxi}.

Figure 4.12: Councillors' perceptions of possible innovations and / or reforms



4.4.2. Desirable future innovations

With respect to a number of other possible innovations tabled, the following offers a brief synopsis of the positions taken.

4.4.2.1. Municipal District boundaries and powers

While there are no published plans, by central government, to devolve more powers to MDs, it would probably be necessary to do so in tandem with a review and / or consolidation of their geographical footprint. Unlike counties (in Ireland) and municipalities (in most of mainland Europe), MDs do not have fixed boundaries, and their footprints were reconfigured in advance of the 2019 local elections in response to data from the 2016 Census of Population^{xxxii}.

4.4.2.2. Cross-border cooperation

The questionnaire results reveal high support for increased levels of cross-border cooperation, and when these figures are analysed by region, the findings show that the strongest support is among councillors who are based in the border region; eighty-three percent of them would 'warmly welcome' such developments.

4.4.2.3. Directly Elected Mayors

Over one-third (35%) of councillors report they would 'warmly welcome' the introduction of directly elected mayors (DEMs), and a further seventeen percent state they would 'welcome' the establishment of such an office. Support for DEMs is highest in Dublin and the Mid-West Region (45% of councillors across both regions would 'warmly welcome' the role). In their interviews, some councillors clarified that they support DEMs on condition that the officeholder be conferred with powers that are currently held by actors other than county or city councillors. Political affiliation emerged as a determinant of councillors' views of DEMs; with the exception of Fine Gael, most members of political parties and most independents are in favour of DEMs.

4.4.2.4. Number of councillors

Just under half (47%) of councillors would welcome increasing the number of councillors, and support for this idea is highest in rural regions and lowest in

Dublin. Other independent variables do not appear to have any bearing on councillors' views on this matter. Conversely, most councillors are opposed to any possible reduction in the number of councillors or further amalgamations of local authorities. Councillors are almost evenly divided with respect to the possibility of having by-elections (rather than the present system of co-option) to replace those who retire, resign or die while in office.

4.4.2.5. An independent support system

In addition to the current training being provided by the AILG in partnership with the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR), which is largely well received, councillors also noted their desire to see an independent support system being established to assist them in interpreting policy and legislation emanating from the Centre (national government and EU) and to ensure they have a better understanding of the key implications of policy / legislative provisions and frameworks for their respective counties. The current system, where councillors are highly dependent on the briefings and / or interpretations provided by the council executive(s) and / or the party headquarters is felt by many to lessen their independent status. The following remarks give further elaboration on these concerns:

- "Sometimes it feels like you're reading through pages and pages and pages of stuff. And like a lot of it can be quite difficult – well, I can, I can find it difficult to understand at times, things you won't really be familiar with on a day-to-day basis" (Councillor 12).
- "The council will bring in their own legal advice, their legal advice and they will tell us the legal advice. And now I don't want to say fully that I don't, I don't trust that but I've one experience in the past where we were given legal advice.... and it turned out that that legal advice was incorrect....it was such an important issue and it was so sensitive and so important for us that I thought I need to get independent advice, which I did" (Councillor 25).
- "You're very much reliant on the Executive to steer you on that, which I don't believe is the appropriate way to do it" (Councillor 13).

There was general consensus that having a seat on the regional assembly (RA), and thus considering national policy and legislation through a regional

lens, is an advantage to councillors, as they are encouraged to take a more holistic and broader view of the implications of what is being proposed, particularly in respect of planning policy.

Some councillors have gone so far as to consider how such a support system could be resourced through the existing training budget for elected officials; with one councillor noting “This panel could be paid for through a contribution from the existing training budget – every councillor commit 20-30%. Everyone has access, and this resource could be utilised through local workshops / training on particular issues that councillors identify as needing greater supports / knowledge in” (Councillor 15). Without specifying where the resourcing would come from, another councillor suggested “if each councillor maybe paid 100-150 euro each, you could go and get your own” (Councillor 25) independent advice, noting that councillors do not qualify for free legal advice.

4.4.2.6. Possible other transfer of functions

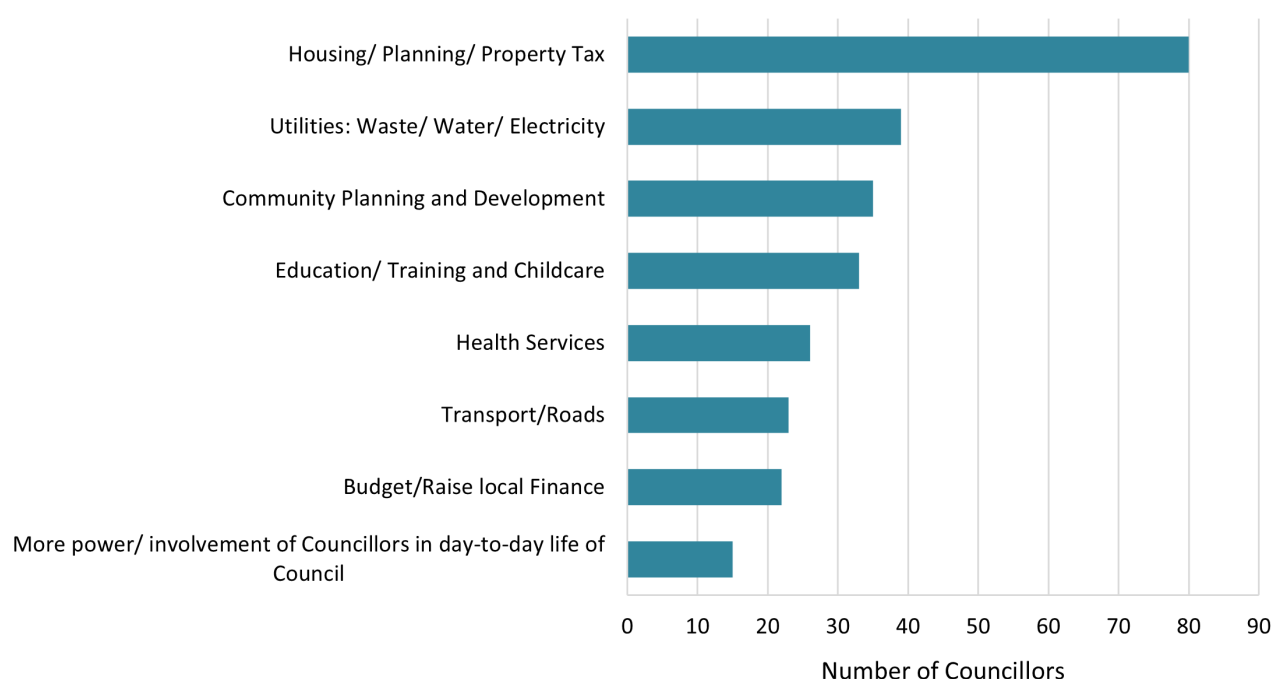
The following table presents councillors’ reactions to the possible transfer of functions from central to local government^{xxxiii}. The functions listed in Table 4.3 are among those that are exercised by local authorities in most other EU members states. The findings indicate high levels of support for local authorities having competencies in respect of community policing, traffic management and transportation. While these functions currently come partially within local authorities’ briefs, the results suggest an appetite for expansion. There is also strong, albeit at a lower level, support for local authorities having functional responsibility for social care.



Table 4.3: Councillors’ attitudes to possible functional transfers from central to local authorities

Reactions	Functions			
	Community Policing	Traffic Management	Transport	Social Care
Definitely yes	52.35%	51.25%	49.77%	31.40%
Probably yes	36.85%	40.36%	39.72%	42.44%
Probably / possibly not	5.16%	6.12%	7.01%	15.12%
Definitely not	5.63%	2.27%	3.50%	11.05%

Figure 4.13: Functions that councillors would like to see being transferred from central to local government



Councillors were also asked to identify other functions that they would like to see being transferred from central to local government, and as Figure 4.13 illustrates, housing and housing-related matters emerged on top. This is unsurprising given the priority councillors attached to housing and housing-related matters in section 4.1.

4.4.3. Challenges for innovation

In gauging councillors' attitudes towards potential opportunities, barriers and challenges with respect to strengthening their roles, the questionnaire included two questions, as presented in the following table. The table 4.4 shows that councillors are more likely (73%) to perceive challenges or barriers than to perceive opportunities (66%).

In a similar vein, less than half (44%) of councillors would welcome gender quotas, and there is a strong gender divergence in the responses; sixty-one percent of females and twenty-one percent of males would 'warmly welcome' gender quotas. Geography is also a notable determinant of councillors' attitudes to gender quotas; support is highest in Dublin and in the Border Region and lowest in the South-West Region.

The remarks on the following page made by councillor in responding to the questionnaire are emblematic of their sentiments with respect to potential innovations and / or reforms:

Table 4.4: Councillors' perceptions of opportunities and challenges / barriers

Question	Yes	No
Do you perceive any opportunity to enhance or strengthen the role of the Councillor?	65.77%	34.23%
Do you perceive any challenges or barriers to enhancing or strengthening the role of the Councillor?	73.15%	26.85%

- "The reforms currently operating such as Irish Water and NPF are proving so restrictive to role of Cllr as to unite all politically to address the point of local government";
- "Give the Mayor, SPC chairs and a reformed Municipal Authorities executive responsibilities and devolve more decision making to elected members";
- "Bring power back to Councils and away from quangos like NTA and TII";
- "Regular working meetings with bodies responsible for essential community functions such that genuine on-the-ground issues can be worked on together in a collaborative way, e.g. Bus Éireann, the NTA, the HSE, Irish Water (although this particular one would likely be pointless), etc.";
- "I see an opportunity to enhance public consultation through better methods of participation including deliberative democracy, town halls and participatory budgeting to name a few. Including citizens in policy making greatly enhances policy making and democracy in my opinion";
- "Major legislative reform to give elected members more power than the Executive";
- "Give councillors power to instruct Executive to CPO land, levy vacant site or derelict site levies, increase the local rate of vacant site and derelict site levies".
- "Central govt could allow some powers to devolve to local government such as transport, policing and education. Ministers could stop appointing senior counsel with no understanding of local govt as highly remunerated consultants to produce irrelevant and inaccurate reports";
- "I would like to see greater direct interaction between Government and elected members in relation to implementation of policy in areas like: arts, culture and sports, transport, housing & rental sectors - management of canals (with Waterways Ireland)";
- "Make the role full time. Create directly elected mayors who work with a cabinet of councillors within a clearly defined structure";
- "To encourage more women to run for politics there needs to be a lot of changes: maternity leave, carers leave & more sociable hours for meetings etc. Women need to be encouraged & supported to go into politics";
- "Childcare should be included in the expenses provision as secretarial support is";
- "The fact that the job doesn't even qualify you for a state contributory pension is, frankly, disgraceful and particularly for women who are mothers as the time required to do the job and raise a family makes it almost impossible to hold another job".
- "We are a changing society, in order to encourage young people in to political life we have to remove the barriers";
- "I would like central government to set broad policy-based targets and then give councils a pot of money to manage in order to achieve these targets as demonstrated by audits, rather than councils having to apply piecemeal for ring-fenced funds from a myriad funding streams e.g. Active Travel, ORIS, etc. Just set the targets and give councils the funding to achieve them. Cut out the central government micro-management; and
- "Give councillors a lot more powers and responsibilities, the kind of powers and responsibilities that local representatives have in most other western countries".
- "Additional powers: over, for example, alcohol licencing hours, financial matters (tax), and somehow a power to initiate things more: most councillors can exercise effective power only to block things, not start them";

“

If executive powers were devolved to the body of councillors, it would certainly be more democratic, it would absolutely enhance our role, it could possibly speed up progress and would certainly make the role of the councillor have more meaning; ”



It would be worthwhile considering including councillors representative bodies in the pre-legislative scrutiny of legislation which has an impact on Local Government. This could be modelled on the Committee of the Regions (CoR) / European Commission model, where the Commission have an obligation to seek the opinion of the CoR on matters relating to local and regional government. In addition, the CoR can offer an own initiative opinion on matters which the Commission has not referred for comment but which the CoR think are of relevance to local and regional government. ”

The interviews and focus groups provided opportunities to tease out some of the anticipated and possible reforms and their implications for the role of the councillor. As the following quotations reveal, councillors are generally in favour of reform, but they want to see reforms that strengthen local democracy and give representatives more influence over council policies. They are also keen to feed more systematically into national and EU-level policy-making, and there is strong support for increasing diversity among councillors:

- “I do think it should be a full-time role and treated as a full-time role and remunerated accordingly. And I think you might have more young people, more woman, might avail of the role rather than the old, retired businessman... I think the meetings should be in the evening to accommodate people who work full-time as well” (Councillor 17).
- “I think what you... want to have a mixture of people, maybe some people who are younger, some people who were older, definitely men and women, more of women than we have. And I think a mixture of backgrounds, but a mixture of professions as well – so people who work at

different levels in society, it’s important to have them” (Councillor 18).

- “I think smaller units would give a better opportunity to focus...; that you’d have councillors both at a very local level, and then you’d have them kind of, you know, focusing at the regional level, and more involved in policy” (Councillor 26).
- “I’d like to see municipal districts with some more teeth, more power, but I’d like to see the county council have more power and to be more, for want of a better word, local legislators” (Councillor 17).
- “Often what you get is, kind of, some local implementation, and kind of very vague, high-level policy statements. And what’s kind of missing in between is the kind of more detailed working out, which would bring in all of the sections of the council. And theoretically, our role as councillors is to be involved in that” (Councillor 08).
- “I do think there could be something to bridge a gap between local politics and national politics and the strategies that are coming through. I suppose that even feeds into European then as well” (Councillor 12).
- “There is other potential European projects that can happen. And... there’s SPCs in every county that should create the policy for their local authority. Now, if that doesn’t go down all the way to the SPC level, in order to create a council policy, you’re going to miss what’s happened at a regional” (Councillor 32).

4.4.4. Summary Remarks

The findings presented in respect of ‘possible innovations’ reveal an appetite, among councillors, for a batch of reforms that would give local authorities a broader functional remit (especially in respect of housing). There is also an appetite for councillors having a greater say in policy- and decision-making, particularly at the municipal level; with independent systems in place to reinforce this. Councillors strongly support further moves to ensure they have a better work-life balance.

4.5. Tools and Skills

Key Messaging

- Councillors recognise the importance of, and growing need for, training and continuous professional development.
- Given the full-time nature of the role and their other commitments, councillors face challenges in accessing and availing of training opportunities.
- There is a high demand for training that deals with planning issues and policy matters.
- Councillors indicate a need for capacity-building to enable them to deal with socio-psychological issues, so they can respond effectively to all constituents, while protecting their own mental health and well-being.
- There is a need to promote more positive behaviours, and to ensure that workplace rights are enforced in all situations in which councillors work. Enforcement needs to be accompanied by training.

The final section of the online questionnaire looked, in greater detail, at opportunities and challenges / barriers, and it asked councillors' about their experiences of continuous professional development (CPD) and the skills and tools they would need to avail of emerging opportunities and to overcome challenges and barriers.

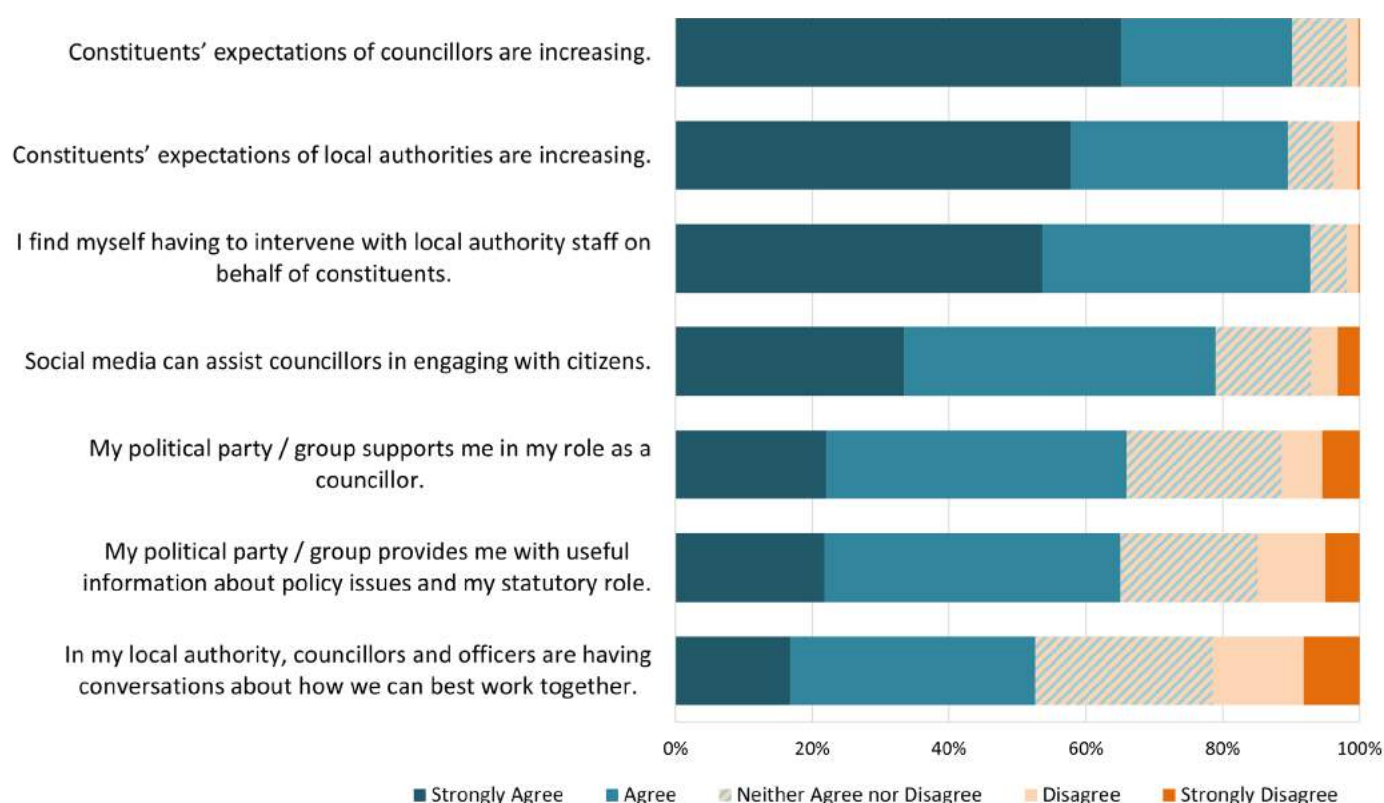
The findings from this questionnaire confirm observations in the international literature that councillors are performing multiple statutory and representative roles. The literature notes that local government is a dynamic space, and local authorities are increasingly at the coalface of many of the challenges facing our society, including climate change adaptation and mitigation. The implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) places considerable responsibilities on local authorities with respect to promoting sustainable development and giving effect to the maxim 'think globally, act locally'. Across Europe, local authorities are currently to the fore in accommodating and supporting those who have fled from war in Ukraine. This demand to be responsive comes in the immediate aftermath of the core role played by councils in supporting local communities and, in particular, the most vulnerable in society, during COVID-19 (Local Government Management Agency, 2020). Local authorities and

those who lead them are required to be informed, innovative, creative and flexible. Moreover, local authority leaders, particularly mayors are called upon to speak on behalf of communities and to provide guidance in times of crises. The changing and evolving, geopolitical, financial, legislative and policy milieus in which local authorities, and by extension councillors, find themselves necessitate investment in CPD, training and upskilling. Thus, the last section of the online questionnaire focussed on councillors' abilities and the tools and skills they require to effectively perform their roles.

4.5.1. Changing dynamics of the councillors' role

In order to set the context for an appraisal of councillors' training needs and expectations, the questionnaire invited councillors to provide more detail about the contexts in which they work. Figure 4.14 presents their perceptions, and it re-asserts sentiments that have already been articulated in this report in respect of the changing dynamics of their roles, particularly the increased expectations among citizens and the pressures councillors feel to intervene with public bodies / service. The context in which councillors exercise their representative functions is becoming more challenging, and new skills and approaches may be required.

Figure 4.14: Levels of agreement / disagreement among councillors in respect of given statements about the context in which they perform their roles



As the figure also shows, almost two thirds of councillors receive some supports from their political parties, although a quarter of them are ambiguous or non-committal in this regard. Just over half of councillors' report that they are having conversations with local authority officials about how best they can work together.

The online questionnaire findings indicate that most councillors believe citizens' expectations of them and of local authorities are changing, and as the interviews and focus groups revealed, councillors are experiencing more aggression from members of the public. They also report an increasing vulnerability among people who come to them, and they observe that COVID-19 has exacerbated people's vulnerability. Consequently, councillors are dealing more (than was previously the case) with service providers and advocating for people, and most of this work is not reported or acknowledged (except by the individuals involved). The following remarks provide insights into councillors' experiences of their dealings with the public and with service providers:

- "The TD thing: there's a couple of them that really annoy me... so say if someone comes to me with an issue in relation to their phone,

we don't have the same access as TDs do. So, say an old lady and she, her phone is at home, it's not working. She can't ring anyone or whatever. During COVID, I have to go into her house and speak with her, do the whole "this lady now wants me to deal with this on her behalf, and I am going to give you the phone now to speak to her and to whatever, blah, blah", and then you have to give the phone back and all this stuff. And there is, it's for the ESB, Bus Éireann all the utilities. I can't contact the HSE. I can't do anything with them, independently myself as a county councillor, which I think is absolutely a nonsense, of the highest order... but it's just a nonsense that I have to do that; that there isn't, like, there's a oireachtas@buseireann.ie or oireachtas@ESB.ie, all the utilities, the Vodafores, all of those, it's the same for every single one of them. It's a complete barrier to me doing my job. I have to ring, go through another thing to get that done, while I'm here with that old lady. (Yes.) It's ridiculous, like" (Councillor 03).

- "I suppose, on the downside of the things that are very annoying for me is the centralisation of, we say... if I ring social welfare, I've a number for the office in [Town

A], I have a number for the office in [Town B] and [Town C]. And both the public and councillors get a lot of reps in relation to social welfare issues, when we ring now you get through to the central location. I can't ring the person that I know in [Town A] and discuss it with them. Whatever number you dial your put through to a central, and that's happening right across the board. It's very impersonal. It's very difficult for me as a councillor and it's extremely difficult for members of the public...now I think maybe TDs may have direct, some direct lines but we don't have it and the public don't have it... So if there's, somebody that's not online or is not into technology then, I have to get that form down to them, and get them to sign it or go down with it myself. So the regulations are making it, I know data protection is important, but it's em...we seem to do everything to the extreme. We won't do anything for a long time, and then we do everything to extreme, which is making it, is more difficult" (Councillor 25).

- "[I] could be bringing people to MABS, because they have issues with a mortgage. You know, it could be dealing with tax problems; it could be dealing with businesses that are about to close; it could be dealing with, you know, children who have been taken from the home; it could be dealing with foster parents. I mean, it's so wide and so broad. People just have no idea of what actually councillors do. And I'm not saying every councillor does that. And I also deal with people outside of my own constituency" (Councillor 28).
- "And recently, I went to suicide prevention training. And I think it's something that every councillor should do. Obviously, we're not a counsellor in the medical sense, but I suppose if

you're a vet, nobody rings you and tells you the dog is okay. When someone rings you, there's something wrong. And a lot of the time, it can be personal situations where people have gone through a lot of stress and are really struggling. And for us to be able to see those signs is very important. And I suppose you deal with a lot of people who say that they have those mental issues that you may be able to point them in the right direction, or just give them a listening ear. And I think that can't be underestimated. And I mean, nobody really, nobody says on their election manifesto that they're here to take a phone call when you're feeling unwell, you know? It's not election manifesto stuff, but it's part of what politicians do" (Councillor 02).

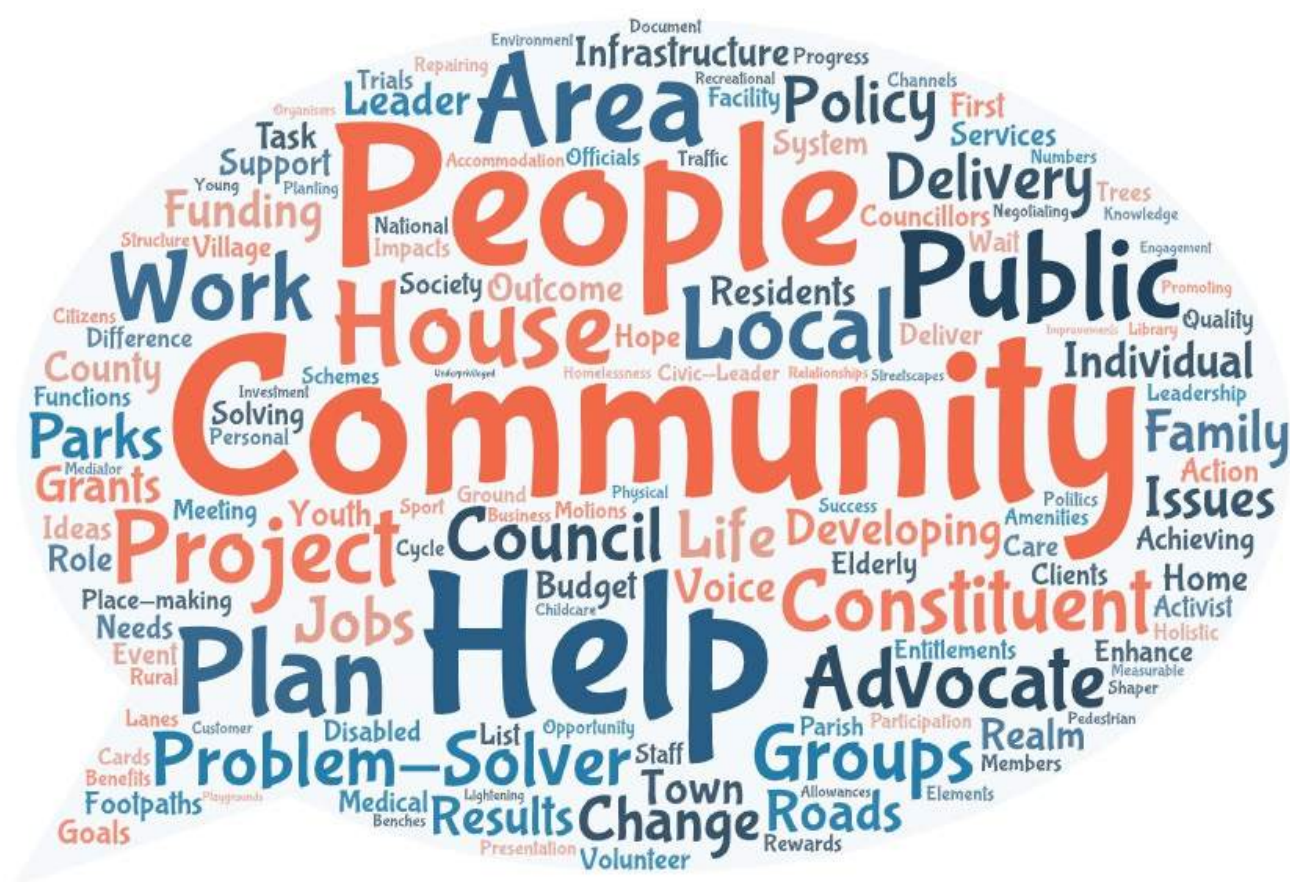
4.5.2. Tools, Skills and CPD

Although their roles are multi-faceted and are increasingly challenging, fewer than half of councillors have undertaken CPD over the past five years, and as Table 4.5 shows, the level is lower among males than females.

Table 4.5: Percentage of councillors who have completed CPD within the past five years

Has done CPD	Female	Male	All
Yes	55.03%	37.81%	44.07%
No	44.97%	62.19%	44.07%

Figure 4.15: The skills councillors perceive to be most important in enabling them to exercise their roles



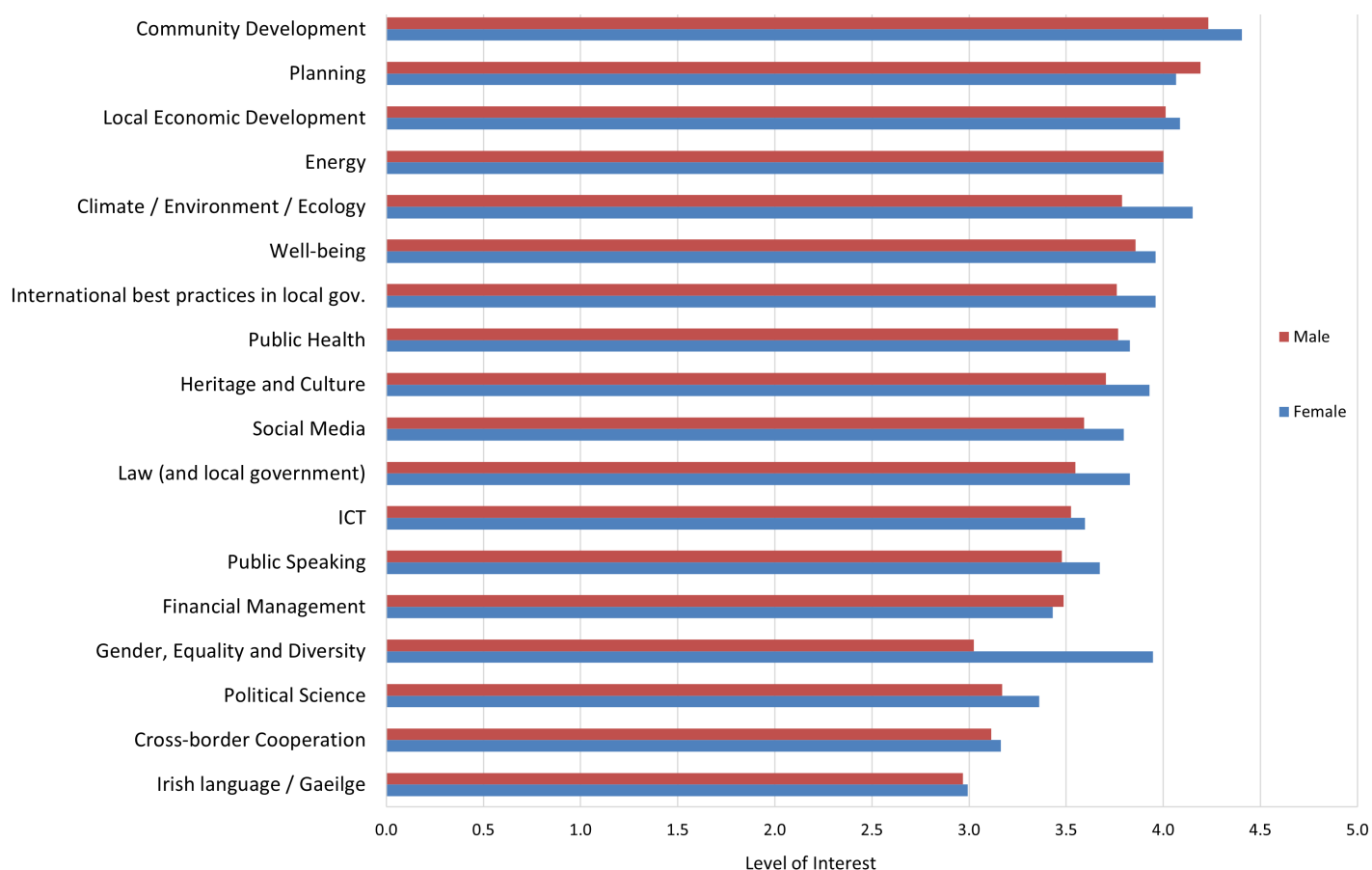
The above wordcloud visualises councillors' responses when they were asked an open-ended question, to identify the skills that are most important in enabling them to exercise their roles.

These responses indicate an ongoing interest in, and commitment to, enhancing councillors' representative roles, as indicated by the emphasis on soft and people-centred skills such as community (development / engagement / leadership), listening and understanding. The responses also indicate the importance of having patience, being empathetic / understanding and able to advocate. The responses point to the need for practical skills, including time management and being organised. ICT skills are becoming increasingly important, as many councils are mainstreaming remote and blended modes of working.

The last part of the questionnaire (before the independent variables) asked councillors to indicate their levels of interest in undertaking CPD in a number of specified areas. This list is of particular importance to the AILG and other training providers / convenors, and it provides specific pointers in

/ convenors, and it provides specific pointers in respect of the demand for particular themes / topics. As Figure 4.16 shows, female councillors expressed a higher level of interest than males did in respect of each of the possible CDP offerings.

Figure 4.16: Councillors' levels of interest in possible CPD offerings – on a scale from 0 (no interest) to 5 (very interested)



4.5.3. Skills of increasing importance

In a follow-up open-ended question, councillors indicated an interest in training in the following areas:

- Organisational behaviour / culture;
- Dignity at work;
- Whistleblowing;
- Negotiation;
- Mediation;
- Diversity and Inclusion;
- Energy and Environment; and
- Housing.

This listing is reflective of the evolving nature of the role of the councillor, the challenges

facing the role and its growing complexity. The following remarks, which councillors made at the end of the online questionnaire, provide useful summations of the context in which councillors work and the issues that shape their expectations of CPD:

- “The role of the councillor is extremely important. We need more civics taught in school and integrated into daily life like it is in other EU countries. Democracy is key to the fundamentals of our society. We need more representation – increased numbers around the council tables and definitely more women”;
- “We, as councillors, put ourselves up for election to the people, and our powers are relatively zero as compared to the civil servant executive. And we have to fill out all these declarations each year as if we were criminals”;

- “Social media has put terrible pressure to be switched on 24/7. Very difficult to work full-time and be a councillor, still huge pressure around planning issues”;
- “The role of the councillor and democracy are both dying simultaneously”;
- “I love my job as a county councillor, but it has changed so much since I first entered local government. Since Town Councils were abolished, our work has doubled and the pay for councillors was so poor, but the increase on January last is certainly welcomed. The introduction of GDPR and the Lobbying Act has meant we need to keep ourselves safe and protected at all times. Social media, while it can help greatly with our work, it can also be very challenging with the keyboard warriors”;
- “I love my role as a councillor and serving my community. Councillors need to be respected by officials and public servants far more”;
- “We need independent legal advice and should not have to depend on the kindness of others to show us how to get things done”;
- “The biggest challenge to local politics is that the make-up of the chamber is not representative of the general population, whether it be gender, ethnicity, social class, etc.”;
- “Councillors’ mental health is a serious issue at the moment. Like the general public, councillors have the same issues, family life, work and health issues but sometimes people do not see this when speaking to elected representatives”;
- “It is an amazing feeling when you get something over the line for a constituent, but it is getting harder and harder, and the demands are getting greater”;
- “Despite all the challenges of being a councillor, local democracy is vital, and the role of the councillor is central”.

their interest and commitment to continuous professional development (CPD), and they provide signposts in respect of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of CPD.

- “We completed our County Development Plan last year and genuinely, like, we were just floored by it, exhausted by it; it was just so demanding as a process. And so you have, you know, legal requirements; you have planning law, you have environmental law, you have all this kind of stuff been thrown at you... So, you know, for a new councillor, sure that must just be a crazy scenario” (Councillor 01).
- “It’s always it’s 24/7. And I suppose the hard part is, is that the brain is always working. You are constantly thinking, when you’re doing your day job, you’re thinking about it; when you’re sitting watching TV at night, when I’m in a conversation with my wife or family, I’m thinking about something... Oh, I must make that call. I must send that email I must. You know, so you’re constantly... it is, it is really a 24/7. I had successfully managed to keep it from impacting on my, on my sleeping until about three weeks ago” (Councillor 11).
- “I did the [course of study undertaken] which was very helpful. I would say that most councillors wouldn’t be even aware that you could do that; most councils wouldn’t... It was another councillor who had told me about it. It wasn’t in any way advertised through the council or through any other network... And that was useful. But outside of that, you felt very much thrown in the deep-end. Like unless you have a party network around you or a good supportive team around you, it’s very difficult to find your feet. No matter how much you think you know about politics and the political system, it’s very, very different when you’re, when you’re in there trying to figure it out” (Councillor 17^{xxxiv}).
- “I mean, you have to be a forensic accountant to change the budget. I have no idea how to do that. So I suppose, they’re, they’re the big concerns, and you just hear a lot of the time that across Europe, that they have much more power in that regard” (Councillor 02).

The following cross-section of quotes from interviews with councillors further illustrate

- “There are people on the Regional Assembly, members of the Regional Assembly who don’t understand what the Regional Assembly does, never mind the general public. I think the Regional Assembly is actually really interesting. And I like it. I kind of like the sort of overarching role it has and the policy impact, and I suppose the links to European programmes as well. It’s really good” (Councillor 18).
- “I feel that in order for change to take place, we need, we do need, a retirement age, whether we like it or not, I think we need that” (Focus Group 03).
- “There might need to be a little bit of investment in technology in local authorities for that to be, I suppose, more efficient, but I do think it could work, would definitely work, and there is progress being made, so I hope that there’ll be a bigger drive towards that” (Councillor 12).
- “But the vast majority of councillors when we were given these laptops, we still haven’t been given, almost three and a half years later, the proper training to be able to use these laptops. Now instead of wasting money for what I call them, junkets... is it not better to give us a proper salary, give us the proper training like you would in any job? Like, the Council staff are constantly trained on different issues within their own local authority, but why is it not the same for us as councillors?” (Councillor 16).
- “That is only going to work if certain timelines can be facilitated different timelines for a different people. It is a full-time job. And unless you have a training day, dedicated once a month, to going through this, and that’s put down with the equivalent of your once every, your third Monday of the month full council meeting. (Yeah.) There has to be something done along those lines, and that training day will outline the policy” (Councillor 10).

4.5.4. Summary Remarks

The questionnaire findings in respect of tools and skills reveal that while there is a clear recognition of the importance of training and up-skilling, almost half of councillors have not availed of CPD. The need for CPD is expected to increase over the coming years, due to the complexities associated with decision-making and multi-level governance. Councillors recognise and value the role of ALLG in providing opportunities for professional development, and they are keen to increase their skills and competencies in several areas, most notably in community development, planning, economic development, energy and climate. This will enable them to continue to deliver effectively for their constituents and county / region. Councillors also note the need to ensure that the provision of CDP is accompanied by ancillary supports.

SECTION 3:

Conclusion and Recommendations

Chapter 5: Concluding Analysis

Recommendations

1. Disseminate and promote this report in order to document, raise awareness of and demonstrate the range and scale of the work councillors do to strengthen democracy, enhance public service delivery, and support communities.
2. Consolidate and strengthen the electoral and decision-making functions of municipal districts.
3. Respond **to** Councillors' growing recognition of the importance of, and growing need for, training and continuous professional development (CPD) by:
 - Delivering systematic training and CPD to councillors, through flexible learning opportunities and with progression pathways and accreditation options.
 - Enhancing councillors' capacity to contribute to evidence-based decision-making at local, national and EU levels.
 - Building councillors' capacity to use ICT more effectively.
 - Supporting councillors to access independent and impartial professional advice and research and to participate in networks and collaborations.
4. Ensure the work councillors do at the regional level is more widely understood and appreciated. This includes raising awareness of new functional geographies, and the role of collaborative working / networking in their delivery.
5. Take additional steps to ensure that local authorities are family-friendly workplaces, and that 'dignity-at-work' is universally applied.
6. Facilitate councillors and council officials to co-design and roll-out a national awareness campaign on the role of the councillor / role of local government.
7. Further enable councillors work collaboratively with local authority executives, public bodies, academia, civil society and other stakeholders to increase public and political trust in local government in general and in councillors in particular, so they can be entrusted with increased powers and responsibilities.
8. Investigate the potential for establishment of a panel of independent advisors / points of reference for councillors to enable effective engagement with the more technical aspects of their role.
9. Use the significant body of evidence that has emerged from this report to inform the work of the Seanad Public Consultation on the Future of Local Democracy and to support a systemic reform of Ireland's local government system in line with the recommendations of the (2023) CLRAE report.

The elected members of Ireland's thirty-one local authorities are performing multiple roles, and there are synergies between their representative and legislative functions. Their experiences, as evidenced by their responses to the questionnaire, and their participation in interviews and focus groups reflect many of the issues that were referenced in the international literature (see Chapter 2); not least in terms of: the multiplicity of roles councillors perform, valorising their representative roles, the growing complexities associated with local government, the importance of addressing challenges associated with remuneration, recruitment and retention, harnessing councillors' knowledge capital, promoting greater diversity, ensuring more family-friendly and inclusive work practices and enhancing councillors' ability and capacity to contribute to policy-formulation and decision-making.

5.1. Importance of Councillors and the Roles they Play

The roles, actual and perceived, held and performed by councillors are constantly evolving. The rate of change has accelerated in recent decades, and it is expected that further changes will happen in the coming years. As outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, local government is the level at which citizens most expect their concerns to be acted upon (Quinn, 2015); with councillors playing a key role in bringing these concerns forward. Despite repeated calls for devolution of decision-making powers to local government, a wider range of functions and increased financial autonomy, there has, by and large, been limited appetite for such reforms at central government level. If anything, the range of functions and financial autonomy have been continually whittled away.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the representational role of the councillor has become increasingly significant, as highlighted by Moorhead (2020). Importantly though, councillors, in their public sector delivery roles continue to play an important role in enacting legislation, ensuring the application of national policy objectives and overseeing the corporate governance of the local authorities to which they are elected. The challenge now for elected members is that they establish a balance between their statutory and

believe there are synergies between these two roles (see section 4.1.1.), this is a scenario not without its challenges. One cannot lose sight of the fact that it is their capacity to deliver on the former that will determine any future devolution of powers from the Centre, while it is their commitment to the latter that will determine future election results. Indeed, as noted in section 4.1., most councillors would contend that the representative roles they perform enable them to better execute their statutory functions.

5.1.1. The role of the councillor

Whilst it was not originally envisaged as such, the role of the 21st Century councillor has evolved into a full-time role. Whilst many sitting councillors have made that decision to commit to the role on a full-time basis, others have decided not to, or they have been unable to do so for a multitude of reasons – ranging from family to career goals to remuneration. As the workload of the councillor expands to include local responses to global issues – including climate change, biodiversity loss, energy security, changing demographics and overall quality of life and well-being – there is a growing recognition that the role is more demanding than ever before and that there are growing challenges and needs around capacity, skills and remuneration. Whilst there is no indication of government policy recognising the role as full-time in the short- to medium-term, it is widely agreed that “we’ve got to bite that bullet” (Relevant External Actor F). This is, in turn, considered critical to enhancing diversity within the councillor base – both in terms of gender and ethnicity; a discussion picked up in section 5.2.

Operating as they do in a complex environment that involves engagement not only with the citizenry but with the council executive and a broad range of other local and regional stakeholders, understanding and documenting the various roles of the councillor is perhaps more pressing than ever. Today's councillor believes their core role to be an advocate on behalf of the citizens within their local area (both municipal district and county / city). This perception tallies with what the international literature is telling us. Indeed, it is clear from both the questionnaire findings and the

subsequent semi-structured interviews that councillors feel a significant frustration with the statutory parts of their role. This is, in large part, due to a belief that they are not experts in many of the subject areas covered by the strategies and policies that are coming down the line at them, that their voice is not taken on board in either legislative- or policy-making; that they do not get sufficient opportunity to contribute, positively, to policy development and, on occasion that policy is already predetermined before it is presented to them. Consequently, many councillors feel they can make little impact strategically, and that they don't have the relevant supports to enable them to contribute positively to these debates or decisions, and they are increasingly placing an emphasis on their representative role, as they feel it's where they can have more effect / impact. Councillors' sentiments are also shaped by the ways in which Ireland's local government system has evolved over recent decades. In her assessment of reforms since the early 1970s, Quinn (2015: 7) observes that,

“

despite the insights of the reform documents, there is little evidence of a clear and consistent philosophy underpinning reform, so the cumulative changes represent a unique blend of innovation, incrementalism and entrenchment. ”

Thus, representative roles appear more stable, continuous, rewarding and attractive, relative to the cut and thrust associated with policy-making.

Yet, it is increasingly clear that if elected members wish to see the role of councillor become a full-time career with appropriate remuneration, supports and capacity building / skill development, more powers must be devolved from central government, and the profile of local councils and councillors needs to be raised. Such steps would improve relations with other levels of government and ensure

councillors / local councils are taken more seriously (as argued in the literature). Getting to this point requires councillors to adopt a more assertive voice in terms of the critical role they (can) play. In addition, they must embrace more fully their roles in strategy development and implementation. As contended by one interviewee,

“

the councillors themselves have to start standing up for themselves, and stop being doormats. But that, that's going to mean getting, you know, a bit tough at times and taking the risk of resourcing the evidence collection that they may require to query and challenge what might be coming out from the Office of Planning Regulator, or the planning division of the Department of Housing or whatever. And until they start doing that, you know, well why would you take them seriously when you've got trade unions to deal with, when you've got various interest groups out there, stakeholders, you know.

An awful lot of the stakeholders... are treated with more respect, in terms of substantive policy engagement, than the elected representatives are. And yet, if the elected representatives really did come together, and you know, start putting the boot in a bit more, they might actually be treated with a bit more regard (Relevant External Actor F). ”

It is not always clear, though, if there is this appetite for change in terms of further devolution and decentralised decision-making processes – particularly amongst the longer-serving cohort of councillors. Despite this, however, there is a clear consensus amongst all respondents to this research (councillors, former councillors, and relevant external actors) that elected members must use the powers they do have if they wish to be entrusted with further powers.

Such opportunities already exist as noted by one interviewee, “The new planning system and the national, regional, local cascade now gives the Members a direct voice into cross-departmental policy – environment, transport, agriculture, planning and economic development” (Relevant External Actor E). This has the potential to be further enhanced under the directly elected mayor model to be piloted in Limerick (see section 5.2.4.2 below). The outcomes of the recent Seanad Public Consultation Committee on the ‘Future of Local Democracy’ may strengthen the philosophy of central government in future reforms, including any prospective changes to the powers of local authorities.

5.1.2. Understanding the role of the councillor

A large cohort of councillors interviewed noted that their interest in running for election / serving on local government was sparked by an early exposure to politics – whether national or local issues – via reading of newspapers or newsletters, family discussions or through volunteerism. Yet, despite this commitment to public service, it is clear that there is a limited understanding of the role and of the core functions of elected members both within the cohort of councillors or local government stakeholders – but also, more widely, amongst the citizens. This gap in understanding has led to calls for a nation-wide information campaign on the role of the councillor; including within primary and secondary schools.

Such an awareness campaign should also strive to increase trust in the local government system and in councillors, while councillors and all other stakeholders in the system need to

ensure local government adheres to the highest standards of good governance.

In light of the losses of function over the past three decades, the idea of a campaign to raise awareness of the working of local government, and the role of the councillor, has been met with mixed reactions. For some councillors, there is a strong fear around the public fully knowing the (perceived) limited powers they have; with some expressing concern that this could reduce engagement (possibly in favour of the TD) and negatively impact on retention and future recruitment.

5.1.3. Engaging with council management

Councillors are very clear that in addition to increasing demands across a wider range of issues, the role is also becoming more technical, in terms of the actions required and the targets that need to be met. They recognise the critical role they have to play in making the right decisions for the right place, while taking cognisance of the individuality of place and their role in placemaking. Too often, they rely on the direction of the council executive – which is not without its biases. There is a growing desire, among councillors, to have access to independent points of reference, to support them in their knowledge development and making the right decisions. Such supports would not be in place of personal development / capacity building (as discussed in section 5.3.4 below), but rather an additional resource.

5.2. Emerging Complexities and Trends in Local Governance

As outlined in Chapter 2, austerity policies, over the past fifteen years, have had adverse effects on the capacity of public bodies, including local government, to deliver services and meet citizen expectations. In Ireland, local authorities were disproportionately affected by financial cutbacks – relative to other arms of government – and this, together with the adoption of new public management (NPM), neo-liberal tendencies and a series of reforms, particularly under the 2014 Act, have diminished the standing of local government, and as noted by Quinn (2015:18), “the continuing melange of policy

consideration and implementation bodies results in administrative complexity and a lack of role clarity". With the transition from government to governance, structures such as the SPCs and LCDCs have raised expectations that councillors will effectively collaborate with civic society leaders and representatives from statutory bodies in decision-making – all at a time when councils are faced with new challenges. Collaboration is becoming increasingly complex while the number of council structures and councillors has been reduced – thus raising fundamental questions around the principle of subsidiarity, a cornerstone of the *European Charter of Local Self-Government*.

5.2.1. Councillor recruitment, induction and retention

As this report shows, councillors perform several important functions, and they work long and unsociable hours. The nature of their work, their low core salaries, complex expenses' regimes and growing citizens' expectations are obstacles to councillor / candidate recruitment and retention. These factors affect all councillors and would-be councillors, except those who are independently wealthy, and they are particularly delimiting for women and young people. There is a need, therefore, to ensure councillors are properly remunerated for the representative, as well as the statutory / legislative, work they do and to promote a healthier work-life balance. The 2023 report of the Dublin Citizens' Assembly tallies closely with the findings of this research in terms of the role of the councillor being recognised as full-time and the need for salaries to be more reflective of the councillors' commitment to the role.

The recent introduction of maternity leave (available since the end of 2022) represents a positive step towards equal opportunities, but there is scope to expand this scheme to include paternity leave – a current government objective – and to provide councillors with a childcare allowance or on-site childcare. SHE and the various women's caucuses are doing important work in enabling local government to be more democratic, inclusive and representative, but there is a need to put these initiatives on a more solid financial footing. Councillors' experiences also point to the importance of more systemic, universal and

standardised induction, especially for those who are co-opted. Induction, like CPD, ought to be promoted by political parties as well as by local authorities and representative bodies.

5.2.2. The Councillor power base

As highlighted in section 5.1 previously, there is a strong perception amongst councillors – whether long-serving or new to the role (2019 elections) – of a persistent erosion of powers over recent decades. This, they believe, has become more prevalent in the past decade – particularly around spatial planning and water services. The shift to multi-level governance and the growing emphasis on collaborative decision-making is presenting both challenges and opportunities. As noted by one interviewee "in one of the more critical areas of policy – planning, we had a very decentralised system and that's now changed fundamentally" (Relevant External Actor F).

It is increasingly observed by elected members that the work of councillors is being overshadowed by elected representatives in higher-tier institutions and in some cases by unelected officials. This was highlighted in Chapter 4; the issue of a blurring of roles – particularly between councillors and TDs – was raised. This blurring of roles, best illustrated by the presence of TDs or indeed Ministers (usually overshadowing councillors) at the opening of a local community centre or a new public realm scheme, is further leading to a misunderstanding of what is, in turn, the responsibility of local government – and councillors – vis-à-vis national government. One commentator illustrated this well via the following case;

“

there was a survey carried out there a while back by [name of local council]....and they were trying to find out how much did local people in [name of county] understand what the council did. And when people were asked what services the Council provided, the top service that was provided was bin collection, which the council hasn't done in about 20 years, you know... but things like facilitating local economic development, promotion of tourism... delivering on local smart travel initiatives, all those sort of initiatives, completely unknown to people, you know (Relevant External Actor F^{xxxv}). ”

In addition to councils facing into a range of new strategic priorities such as climate change and changing demographics, there is also a growing expectation that councillors will work to new geographies, particularly to functional economic areas that may transcend administrative boundaries. This is critical not only in terms of many of the strategic priorities for local government not adhering to administrative boundaries but also because such functional geographies are increasingly reflective of how people live their lives – both socially and economically. Working to such geographies is not a new phenomenon; those councillors who sit on the regional assemblies or represent a border council are already doing so, but understanding functional geographies and working on the basis of functional areas must become the norm rather than the exception.

5.2.3. Diversity in the council chamber

There is general recognition that positive steps are being taken to improve diversity in

the council chamber – particularly in terms of increasing the number of ethnic minorities and women elected. Political parties have assumed a key responsibility in this regard, with more recently programmes such as SHE and the WoMeN's Regional Caucus playing an enabling role. While these efforts are beginning to show results in terms of increasing diversity within the chamber, a lot more needs to be done in terms of retention and addressing the functional complexities that this report has highlighted. One interviewee commented that “I see, you know, local authorities are applying for funding for, you know, to increase diversity in local government, and then not really knowing what to do with that money. I see woman councillors being encouraged to apply for money to run caucuses, but again, without somebody to drive that within the local authority the woman councillors are the least well-placed people to put a caucus together themselves” (Relevant External Actor B) given the range of pressures they are already juggling, both councillor-related and personal.

There is general recognition also that more needs to be done to ensure that the council chamber / the councillor profile is more reflective of today's society; with responsibility lying with central government, political parties and the Council Executive to promote and embrace diversity. One observation noted during the interviews was that, “I would think that if Chief Executives were serious about wanting to see more diversity, one of the things they could do is start by minding their newer councillors better. And I think the meetings' administrator or his or her team should be tasked with that” (Relevant External Actor B).

5.2.4. Future / possible reforms and reconfigurations

5.2.4.1. Municipal Districts

Officially, councillors are members of city and / or county councils. Yet, their main electoral and functional bases are smaller, sub-county or sub-city units; they are elected at municipal district / local area level, and most of the representations they receive come from groups and individuals within their electoral areas. Councillors exhibit an affinity with local communities, and their local knowledge and insights can complement and add value to institutional and exogenous

institutional and exogenous expertise. The formation of municipal districts (MDs), under the *Local Government (Reform) Act in 2014*, has put sub-county / sub-city geographies on a statutory footing, and while most councillors have misgivings about the abolition of Ireland's town councils, they believe that MDs represent an effective space, in which they can address local issues, needs and potential.

As noted in Chapter 3, MDs are closer in scale / size to local government units across the EU than are county- or city-level authorities. Indeed, within the recently adopted monitoring report of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE), the establishment of MDs were acknowledged as an important “democratic innovation, which brings decisions on some local matters closer to the citizens” (June 2023, 17). An ongoing challenge, however, remains around embedding the structure and building on its capabilities. A key solution to this is to define constant boundaries for each MD – rather than them shifting after each census of population as a result of population growth / decline. While there is a broad understanding of the constitutional imperatives around boundary reviews, the lack of geographical continuity is not conducive to good governance. In light of the research findings, it is worth giving consideration to proposals such as the one put forward by the now-retired and long-serving member of Killarney Town Council and Kerry County Council, Seán O’Grady who wrote,

“

I believe if the county structure should exist, it should be for just a very limited amount of functions like coastal erosion, a county development plan, a county emergency plan, a road function... Everything else should be the function of the district councils, with two delegates plus a member of the executive from each district to meet on a bi-monthly basis, at county level, to discuss and reach agreement on the above subjects (2019: 87). ”

5.2.4.2. Directly Elected Mayors

The pending move towards a directly elected mayor (DEM) in Limerick City and County in June 2024, and possibly in Dublin, will bring with it a further change to the Council Executive / councillor relationship, and will prove to be an important ‘test-case’ of the principle of subsidiarity, as embedded in the *European Charter of Local Self-Government* (Creamer *et al.*, 2021). Under the draft *Local Government (Mayor of Limerick) Bill 2023*, it is clear that the DEM will have an enhanced suite of powers, supported by a mayoral budget. In addition, government departments and public bodies will be required under statute to consult the mayor, on request, in relation to national policy or legislation that may impact on Limerick or Limerick City and County Council, as a complement to the consultative forum engagement^{xxxvi}. There is much groundwork remaining in terms of both the Council Executive and the councillor body as a whole gaining a true understanding of what having what is, in effect, an executive mayor in office means. There is value-added in looking to other cities such as Bristol, where the role of DEM has existed for over a decade, and which has been widely studied by academics such as Prof. Robin Hambleton of the University of the West of England. As councillors begin to consider the implications of the DEM for local government and good governance, possible scenarios tabled have included:

- “I would empower the French-style mayors in small towns, which would be full-time posts and would be executive, and we’d have a proper position to do it. And that will give some form of full-time career, shall we say. A properly paid career and executive power” (Focus Group 05).
- “If you had thirty mayors, I mean, the first thing...first thing on the agenda is, let’s all sit down around a table here and let’s work together, you know, to make sure that local issues get treated with the, the consideration that is their due. And let’s look at how resources are allocated. And why is it that [name of government minister] is going out handing out to all these little grants all over the place? Surely, just give the mayor the grant, and let him or her decide where it’s going in Limerick and Westmeath, and Galway and whatever. So that would be the sort of thing you might expect to come

out of that exercise. And that in a way ha happened in England with the introduction of the mayoral authorities” (Relevant External Actor F^{xxxvii})

It is quite clear that there is a lot of interest amongst councillors at present in how the DEM model could change the workings of the council and affect the dynamic between local and central government, and between the councillor and the council executive. It is also quite clear that councillors have been paying particular attention to the position of mayor and the potential executive powers they may receive – possibly to the detriment of building an understanding of the implications of having an executive mayor on the functions and capacity of the wider councillor community. An awareness campaign is required for all councillors on the changes that will materialise under a generic DEM model, noting that, as one commentator expressed “every local authority area should be able to vote for to have its own directly elected mayor. That’s fine. I would prefer to see them, at least initially, anyway, just confined to the cities.... it probably would be slightly different in all, all locations.... it is likely that the model in Ireland may be different for Dublin compared to all other cities” (Relevant External Actor A).

The deliberations and recommendations of the Dublin Citizens’ Assembly need to be taken into account in making any further moves to DEMs, not only in terms of powers but also term limits and financing while the processes and outputs of the Limerick Implementation Advisory Group on Directly Elected Mayor with executive functions may well offer a template for other local authorities.

5.2.4.3. Digitalisation – hardware and skills

The questionnaire findings reveal that councillors, especially those who live in rural areas, spend a lot of time travelling, and councillors are expected to attend meetings, functions and community events. Remote and hybrid working, together with the growth in DEG and advances in technology / digitalisation, has assisted councillors in managing their schedules. As one interviewee reported, “virtual platforms have made it easier for councillors to be at meetings, and attendance tends to be higher over the last number of years” (Relevant External Actor C). The findings indicate a need

to ensure councillors are not just provided with hardware, but are provided with technical support, back-up and training, so they can make effective use of information technology. They also point to the importance of ensuring that councillors are afforded the necessary time and space to ensure they can develop their skills and capacity.

5.2.4.4. Internal systems – a hybrid model

Finally, there is a growing sense that the current way council meetings are operated is ineffective and inefficient. These inefficiencies became increasingly apparent for many during the COVID-19 pandemic, when meetings and training moved online and could be attended remotely. As one commentator noted, “so I think that there’s a set way of conducting council business, that’s never really been challenged. Newer councillors, younger councillors coming in, seeking to challenge that and upset the status quo, are probably finding it very hard going” (Relevant External Actor B). This is particularly so amongst those with other employment / businesses, young families or who are striving for a better work-life balance. Importantly, it was recognised that this is not just a gender issue;

“

I think hybrid meetings certainly help. I think giving women, giving men, giving everyone the opportunity, because it's not just about women who maybe have small children or men who just have small children, it's people who have full time jobs that maybe are juggling the two. That might make it much, much easier to attend a meeting, to do so virtually (Former Councillor 01).

”

Given technological advances over the past decade, and emerging advances in virtual reality (VR) for example, it may be an opportune time for both the council executive and councillors, on a county-by-county basis, to work together on revising the delivery of the council meetings.

5.3. Enhancing the Role of the Councillor

Ireland's councillors are expected to have extensive knowledge and expertise in respect of issues that come within local authorities' agendas, even if those issues are outside local authorities' functional or legislative responsibilities. Despite their narrow functional remits, Ireland's local authorities exercise soft power (Lehane, 2018), and councillors interface systematically with citizens, civil society, service providers, statutory bodies and higher-tier decision-makers, and councils shape and influence the milieu in which other bodies operate. It is important, therefore, that councillors have structured, systematic and resourced pathways for continuous professional development (CPD) and have access to training and capacity-building. Much of the work councillors do is under-recorded and poorly documented, and it is necessary, that the citizenry, educators, service providers and functionaries be better informed about the work councillors do and the ways in which they can contribute to the strengthening of democracy and the enhancement of public service delivery. This report represents a useful contribution to documenting and valorising the work of councillors, and it should be disseminated and discussed in the media, academia and decision-making fora.

The future enhancement of the role of the councillor further requires an understanding of the variances in the transfer of powers from one agency to another. This report focuses quite heavily on the transfer of powers from local government to agencies such as Uisce Eireann, TII and the NTA. It is clear that further analysis is required to differentiate between the movement of functions from Departments of Government to an agency vis-à-vis recentralisation.

5.3.1. Regional-tier decision-making

Unlike in most of Europe, Ireland's regional tier of government is not directly elected, and as councillors observed, the work and remit of our regional assemblies are not widely known or discussed in public fora. While the questionnaire posed some specific questions about regional governance, councillors spontaneously brought up their experiences of regional fora, and they spoke about the merits of having regional-level perspectives on spatial planning and wider sustainable development agendas. Relevant external actors, whom we interviewed as part of this research, observed that councillors provide a useful link between the local and the regional and they make important contributions to decision-making at the regional level.

They recounted that as the regional spatial and economic strategies (RSEs) were being developed and position papers were being drafted, councillors "went through each of those with a fine-tooth comb with the planning staff and their own local authority. So, as well as bringing their own interests, knowledge, expertise, they're also getting that... every local authority, if you like, was getting their piece in" (Relevant External Actor D). The interviewees noted, however, that councillors

- "understand their responsibilities from a legislative policy-making perspective, but don't initiate that policy agenda" (Relevant External Actor C).
- "They react to what we bring rather than, rather than them being proactive themselves, although we have one or two members who are trying to shift that agenda, and it's probably because they're members of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) (Relevant External Actor D).

Relevant external actors who contributed to this research echoed sentiments expressed by councillors; they noted that regional assemblies (RAs) can provide a platform in which councillors can discuss policy issues, including in respect of functions that have been lost at local government level. The regional assemblies are also promoting beneficial conversations and networking among councillors on an inter-county basis, and there is scope to increase

all councillors' (including non-RA members) awareness of the assemblies' roles and potential. There is also a need to ensure that those who have the strongest policy backgrounds, competencies and interests are, under the current appointments system, nominated on to the regional assemblies. As noted earlier, each RA has produced, and is overseeing the implementation of, the RSEs. A core element of each RSE is a set of metropolitan area strategic plans (MASPs). Yet, Ireland's second tier cities (particularly Waterford and Limerick) are under-represented on the regional assemblies, relative to councillors who are based rurally, and there is a need to ensure city councillors can feed more systematically into regional planning, particularly given the role envisaged for second-tier cities under the National Planning Framework (NPF). One possible solution to this, as recommended in the newly adopted monitoring report of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe (CLRAE) is that RA members "are elected directly by the citizens. This would also make regional government in Ireland more similar to the regional level in other European countries" (June 2023, 17).

5.3.2. Equality opportunities and dignity at work

Many councillors' experiences of prejudice, racism and sexism in formal and non-formal settings and on social media inhibit them from fulfilling their roles, contribute to premature retirements, are deterrents to recruitment and would not be acceptable in any workplace. The online questionnaire findings indicate that local government lags behind other sectors and workplaces in respect of 'dignity-at-work' policies and practices. There is a need for councillors and officials to work collaboratively to ensure that dignity-at-work is universally and effectively applied in all settings and circumstances in which councillors do their business. The promotion of dignity-at-work needs to be accompanied by gender-proofing mechanisms, and the research findings also point to a need for a wider societal conversation about, and regulation of, social media. As one councillor pointed out,

“

This is a workplace. You know, and in terms of how we treat each other as colleagues, you know, and so I think, yeah, it absolutely shall be treated like a workplace (Focus Group 04). ”

5.3.3. Harnessing knowledge capital

While it is beyond the scope of this research to examine local authority executives' experiences of the changed and evolving roles of local authorities, the accounts provided by some councillors in respect of their interfacing with local authority officials indicate that there is a need to improve relationships and to promote more collaborative working. There is a palpable frustration among councillors with being unable to 'make a phone call' to an official or to 'fix a problem'. Councillors' and officials' experiences of working groups, at RA level, suggest that such discursive and collegiate fora ought to be tried at local authority level, particularly when formulating county development and local area plans. As one of the interviewees remarked, "I think one of the strengths, ultimately, of the regional strategies, was that engagement where the members were so involved, and we had working groups" (Relevant External Actor C).

Visioning such a model at local level, one commentator proposed "so maybe if you had a structure in a local authority to say, right, you have your elections, you've elected 48 councillors. But on top of that, we're also having an election for the eight or 10 or 15, executive elected members. These are the board of management, public representatives on the board of [name of local authority]. So along with the Manager, and the nine Directors of Services, we're also electing four, five or six full time paid positions on the board and working in the council and these are also elected" (Former Councillor 03^{xxviii}).

In their contributions to this research project, several councillors referenced the work of TDs and many mentioned senators. They noted that members of the Oireachtas benefit from having

access to an independent research and advisory service and from having dedicated research budgets. Some councillors, who are members of political parties, can avail of their relationships with TDs and senators to access research and information, but most councillors are relying on informal networks and happenstance. Moreover, councillors recount mixed experiences of their engagements with political parties; some report that they feed systematically into parties' decision-making processes, while others (from the same parties) report that they find it difficult to get any traction from party officials and / or Oireachtas members. The research findings indicate, therefore, a need to systematically support and harness councillors' knowledge capital; a point also raised in the report of the Dublin Citizens' Assembly (2023). The aforementioned approaches to training and capacity-building that are evident in New South Wales and in the work of SHE and the women's caucuses (whereby training is available pre-selection, during a councillor's induction and continuously) represent models that ought to be more systematically applied. Higher education institutes and professional bodies such as the Institute for Public Administration (IPA) and the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) could also play a greater role in upskilling councillors, thereby augmenting the work being done by AILG.

5.3.4. Continuous Professional Development and capacity-building

Notwithstanding the relatively narrow functional remit and small resource base of Ireland's local authorities and the country's high level of centralisation (as documented by the OECD and the recently adopted report of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe), councillors are dealing with a wide and growing range of issues. As one relevant external actor remarked, "the 2014 Act required only an economic development SPC" (Relevant External Actor A), and although there is a need to ensure councillors input into fields such as spatial planning and climate action, the establishment of additional SPCs would place further pressures and responsibilities on them. Regardless of the structural configurations of local authorities (in respect of SPCs and working groups), it is important to ensure councillors have opportunities to shape decision-making, as per their statutory remit. To do so effectively,

they require access to reliable information to support evidence-based decision-making.

There is a growing acceptance of the need to introduce a more formalised approach to CPD for councillors – as exists across a range of other professions. In some ways, systematic CPD is regarded as a key step in both professionalising the role of the councillor and in improving the capacity and skills base, and therefore the calibre, of councillor. Those who have engaged in CPD report positively on their experiences and their increased capacity to grasp policy issues and make decisions, and the findings presented in Section 4.5 provide clear signposts in respect of CPD content that would be supportive of both their statutory and representative roles. As noted by one elected member, councillors need and deserve "measures to improve the quality of the councillors themselves, because that will benefit the councillor, and there will be a resistance to the idea that, that that skills are lacking and improvement are needed in terms of quality at local government level, but I think we have to admit that it is a problem" (Councillor 06). Taking this a step further, one interviewee made the point that "every councillor should be doing a level six or a level seven Springboard on leadership, you know, some management programme. You know, it's, it's there, it can be done, it can be funded; it can be done over a year or two; get everyone up to a level" (Former Councillor 03).

Indeed, mechanisms such as Springboard and the various micro-credit and/ or special purpose programmes offered by third-level institutes, including University College Cork and Maynooth University, could provide councillors with pathways for accredited training.

Networking, through cross-border networks, Shared-Island initiatives and the Committee of the Regions have enabled councillors to do their work more effectively, and the study findings point to the importance of furthering networking and collaboration opportunities. Councillors report that the AILG is an enabler of networking, collaboration, CPD and capacity-building. They convey an affinity with, and respect for, the organisation and its secretariat, and they suggest that the AILG

can, subject to resourcing, play an enhanced role in providing them with additional tools and supports that will enable them to do their work more effectively. In particular, the AILG has the potential to conduct more independent research and to provide councillors with advice and guidance in respect of the issues about which they are making decisions. The AILG can also advocate for improved working conditions, greater diversity and more equal opportunities. Interviewees noted a potential for more synergies between the AILG and the Local Authorities Members Association (LAMA), and they suggested that the AILG could learn from the experiences of its equivalents in other EU member states and from organisations such as COSLA^{xxxix} (in Scotland) or indeed the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) and County and City Management Association (CCMA). As noted by an interviewee “the AILG needs to beef itself up considerably and that means looking to raise the resources necessary to underpin, you know, a fully developed policy unit, to not be dependent upon, you know, the personal commitments of their existing staff to do all that work. It's an, it's an unfair yet continuing aspect of their role, I think, in the AILG. So they need to have, they need to have a team of people in the way that the LGMA/CCMA have to or, or maybe even better, to work with the LGMA/CCMA to have those supporting platforms available to both, because at the end of the day, an awful lot of the issues for CCMA are the same as they are for AILG” (Relevant External Actor F).

5.4. This Research and Next Steps

The publication of this research is timely as it comes shortly after the release of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (Monitoring) Committee Report on the *Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the European Charter of Local Self-Government* (CLRAE, October 2023). It also comes at a time when the Seanad Consultation on the Future of Local Democracy is underway; local elections will take place in mid-2024 and, in tandem, it is expected that the first directly elected mayor (DEM) election in Ireland will take place in Limerick. While this research had a much narrower brief than the CLRAE Monitoring Committee or the Seanad Consultation, it is noteworthy that, in their assessments of the changing role of the councillor, the elected

members of Ireland's local authorities made extensive and capricious remarks on the need for systemic changes in local government. The research questions that were posed in this programme of work may have focused on particular issues and themes, but as the presentation of the findings illustrates, there are correlations between several issues, and systemic changes are required in order to enable the local government system to deal with these issues and to make progress on the implementation of the recommendations that have been put forward.

While not wanting to overstate the outputs of this research, there are clear parallels and complementarities between its' recommendations and those of CLRAE, with the evidence presented here also arguing that local authorities ought to have greater responsibility for a larger share of public affairs and greater resources. The questionnaire findings reflect the CLRAE observations on the need for balance between elected members and chief executives. CLRAE also makes specific recommendations in respect of central government ensuring that local authorities are more regularly and systematically consulted and that they are enabled to use more discretionary powers. The implementation of both sets of recommendations presents significant and potentially far-reaching opportunities for the strengthening of local democracy in Ireland. Yet, there will be attempts to detract from, or dilute, progress, and the AILG and other stakeholders will face challenges on this worthy trajectory.

This report presents data from the most extensive survey that has ever been undertaken among the elected members of Ireland's local authorities. It contains a significant volume of valuable information that ought to be of use, not just to AILG, but to councillors and local government officials as they undertake their work, provide valuable public services and underpin local democracy. The research findings also have implications for those who interface with the local government system, particularly policy-makers and government officials. Consequently, the recommendations that are put forward here speak to a broad range of stakeholders, and collaborative approaches will be required in order to ensure their implementation. To this end, a group of

key stakeholders should be brought together to provide views and advice on implementation of the report's recommendations and reform agenda. The Implementation Advisory Group created to advise on how best to design and shape the role of the directly elected mayor in Limerick could serve as a useful model, albeit with a more national membership. Recognising the role of the 21st Century councillor is completely intertwined with the workings and role of local government. As such, strategic stakeholders to any such group would need to include the Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), the City and County Managers Association (CCMA) and the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) to name but a few.

This report's publication comes at a time when Seanad Éireann is seeking evidence to inform its work on the future of local democracy, and it is essential that this report feed into the Seanad's considerations. Legislative changes have recently taken place to enable the citizens of Limerick to directly elect their own mayor, and the report of the Dublin Citizens' Assembly is also likely to engender legislative and structural changes. The working-out of those reforms and other changes in Ireland's local government system ought to take account of councillors' perspectives, experiences and recommendations, as articulated in this report. Ireland's decision-makers and institutions are also obliged to respond to the aforementioned CLRAE recommendations, and this report provides insights and signposts that will enable them to do so in an evidence-based manner. Additionally, this report ought to stimulate, create and inform other opportunities and avenues for the strengthening of local democracy.

It is essential, therefore, to ensure that evidence-bases continue to be expanded – in support of evidence-based decision-making and that councillors and other local government stakeholders act responsibly as powers are transferred to them and as the local government system becomes more inclusive, representative, responsive and resilient.

Considering the significance of the body of evidence presented here, and in the light of emerging, anticipated and potential

opportunities, AILG will devise a work programme/action plan to pursue the report's recommendations. This will include AILG's ongoing commitment to promoting councillors' well-being and welfare, advocating for them and enhancing their skills and capacities. It will also focus on the role of the councillor as part of a wider reform of local government and on ensuring that the outputs of the Seanad Éireann and CLRAE processes are consolidated and that responses are coherent and that these deal with issues of scale, representativeness, power balances, vertical and horizontal governance and the interfaces between local, regional and national government. And importantly, it will be essential to repeat this survey in ten programme/action plan to pursue the report's recommendations. This will include AILG's ongoing commitment to promoting councillors' well-being and welfare, advocating for them and enhancing their skills and capacities. It will also focus on the role of the councillor as part of a wider reform of local government and on ensuring that the outputs of the Seanad Éireann and CLRAE processes are consolidated and that responses are coherent. It is critical that these deal with issues of scale, representativeness, power balances, vertical and horizontal governance and the interfaces between local, regional and national government. And importantly, it will be essential to repeat this survey in ten years' time, in order to measure progress on the implementation of its recommendations, but also to do a further stocktake on the achievements, anxieties and ambitions of the 21st Century councillor in Irish local government.

SECTION 4:

Appendices and References

Appendix A: Project Team

Prof. Brian Donnellan

Brian is the former Vice President for Research and Innovation at Maynooth University and Professor of Management Information Systems at Maynooth University Business School. His other activities include: Chairman of the All-Ireland Smart Cities Forum and board member of the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), Co-Principal Investigator in the Irish Software Research Centre, “LERO” and The Smart Cities Research Centre, “ENABLE”. Prior to becoming an academic, he spent 19 years working in the ICT industry.

Dr Brendan O’Keeffe

Brendan operates an independent research consultancy. He is a senior research associate with the ICLRd and has worked with ICLRd colleagues on several projects and initiatives in both research and facilitation capacities over the past fifteen years. Brendan is passionate about good governance and rural and community development. His main areas of expertise are social research, local development, community planning, evaluations, project management and organisational change.

Caroline Creamer

Caroline is Director of the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) and a Research Fellow with the Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute and the Innovation Value Institute at Maynooth University. She is Facilitator of the All Ireland Smart Cities Forum, and ESPON Contact Point for Ireland. She has worked in a research and management capacity on a number of funded projects and action research programmes – at various scales – over the past 20 years. She has been actively involved in the co-design and delivery of capacity building training with Councils, and in the creation of learning networks for different sectoral interests. A qualified town planner, her research interests include spatial planning practice and policy, leadership in place-making and place-shaping, regional and local development and regeneration, collaborative and participative decision-making, and inter-territorial and cross-border development.

Appendix B: Project Methodology

The research employed a mixed-methods approach to collecting data from councillors and the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Online Questionnaire

The online questionnaire was administered using Jisc Online Surveys (MU Licence), and included a mix of questions that were specific to the Irish context and were framed around a number of key headings; namely:

1. The Role of Councillors;
2. Challenges facing Councillors;
3. Implications of Reforms and Reconfigurations;
4. Possible Innovations; and
5. Tools and Skills.

The AILG took a lead-role in the dissemination of the online questionnaire through their various structures and databases. As appropriate, members of the research team attended AILG events to promote the online questionnaire and assist councillors, as required, to complete it.

Focus Groups

The focus groups were held online via Zoom and took the form of roundtable discussions; involving between 2-6 councillors in each. Each focus group was repeated twice – usually scheduled for morning and evening to maximise opportunity for engagement – acknowledging that many councillors have other employment.

The discussions were semi-structured in nature; with the direction of exploration largely driven by the participating councillors. The focus groups were held as follows:

Focus Group	Date
Ethnic Minorities	26 July 2022 27 July 2022
Female Councillors	21 October 2022 (2 groups)
First-Time Councillors	27 October 2022 10 November 2022

One-To-One Interviews

The online questionnaire and focus groups were supplemented with a series of semi-structured, one-to-one or small group interviews. Over the period May to November 2022, interviews were held with the following cohorts:

- A cross-section of councillors (based on geographic purposive sampling);
- Young councillors – those aged under 30 years;
- Former TDs who are now serving members of local government; and
- Premature exits i.e., those who did not seek re-election in 2019, or did not complete their terms of office pre the 2019 local elections - with a particular focus on the issue of retention.

In addition to engagement with Councillors, one-to-one interviews were also held with relevant external actors (REAs); this cohort included representatives from key agencies who work closely with elected officials, such as government departments, government advisors and policy-makers.

Recruitment of Participants

Recruitment for the semi-structured interviews and focus groups occurred in three ways:

(1) The research team engaged with each of the three Regional Assemblies (between 33 – 38 members each) and invited members to self-nominate as potential interviewees. Where a shortfall remained, the research team employed purposive sampling based on gender, political party, county/location to fulfil the quota. This ensured a geographic spread as well as a mixed profile in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity. Ten interviews were conducted in each of the three RA areas;

(2) Through a review of each county council website, the team created a database of all 949 elected officials in Ireland. With the assistance of the AILG staff, the team have further categorised this database by gender, under 30/ over 30 years of age and ethnicity. This acted as a second sampling frame; and

(3) The research team, with the assistance of the AILG, produced a separate database of co-options to local government since the 2019 elections based on publicly available news items, press briefings etc. The vast majority of co-options resulted from the General Election.

Using these databases (from points (2) and (3) above), a random sample was identified and approached for either interview or to be part of a focus-group. Engagement was purely voluntary. For each cohort, a preferred sample size was identified. Recognising that not all invited to participate would agree to do so, the random sampling included additional numbers in anticipation of this.

Ethical approval for this research was via Maynooth University. In advance of any interview/focus group taking place, an information sheet on the project and a consent form were emailed to all participants. Where

the consent form was not returned in advance, consent was audio-recorded at the start of each interview / focus group. A copy of the ethical approvals received from MU are available upon request.

Appendix C: Membership Of Project Steering Group

The Project Steering Group established to oversee, guide and promote this research was made up as follows:

Chair:

- Dr. Brid Quinn, Formerly University of Limerick; Currently a member of the Group of Independent Experts of the CLRAE

Members:

- Dr. Bernie O'Donoghue-Hynes, Head of Research, Local Government Management Agency (LGMA)¹
- Mr. Diarmuid O'Leary, Principal Officer, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH)
- Mr. Noel Dempsey, Former TD and Minister for the Environment
- Mr. Seamus Neely, Former Chief Executive, Donegal County Council

Observers – AILG:

- Mr. Tommy Moylan, Co-Director
- Mr. Liam Kenny, Co-Director
- Ms. Elaine Lynch, Communications Officer

¹ With regard to the Group's term of reference focusing on 'Advise (and work with relevant) stakeholders, as appropriate, to implement recommendations that emerge', it should be noted that it would be a conflict of interest for the LGMA to be responsible for promotion of recommendations.

Appendix D: Crosstabulations

D1.1: The main role of the councillor

Main Role	All Respondents	Gender		Length of Service							Third-Level	
		Female	Male	0 to 5 yrs.	6 to 10	11 to 15	16 to 20	20+ yrs.	Up to 10	10+	Yes	No
		35.8%	25.7%	34.6%	20.4%	28.6%	27.8%	28.9%	29.5%	28.5%	35.7%	21.7%
Advocate	29.1%											
Fixer / Problem-Solver	27.0%	28.4%	26.3%	28.6%	37.9%	19.0%	24.1%	16.9%	31.9%	19.5%	24.7%	29.1%
Civic leader	19.5%	12.8%	22.6%	12.1%	20.4%	23.8%	24.1%	28.9%	15.1%	26.0%	15.7%	23.9%
Information conduit	4.5%	3.4%	5.2%	6.0%	4.9%	3.2%	3.7%	2.4%	5.6%	3.0%	5.5%	3.5%
Initiator of Action	4.3%	4.1%	4.3%	3.8%	2.9%	6.3%	3.7%	6.0%	3.5%	5.5%	3.1%	5.7%
Political Activist	4.3%	3.4%	4.9%	3.8%	2.9%	9.5%	3.7%	3.6%	3.5%	5.5%	3.1%	5.7%
Place-shaper	3.1%	3.4%	3.1%	3.3%	2.9%	3.2%	1.9%	3.6%	3.2%	3.0%	3.5%	2.6%
Decision-maker	2.9%	3.4%	2.8%	0.5%	3.9%	0.0%	3.7%	8.4%	1.8%	4.5%	2.7%	3.0%
Policy-maker	2.5%	0.7%	3.1%	2.7%	1.0%	4.8%	3.7%	1.2%	2.1%	3.0%	2.7%	2.2%
Mediator / Negotiator	0.8%	1.4%	0.6%	1.1%	0.0%	1.6%	1.9%	0.0%	0.7%	1.0%	0.4%	1.3%
Plan-maker	0.8%	0.7%	0.9%	1.1%	1.0%	0.0%	1.9%	0.0%	1.1%	0.5%	0.8%	0.9%
Form-filler (for constituents)	0.4%	0.7%	0.3%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	0.4%	0.4%
Overseer	0.4%	1.4%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%
Legislator (law-maker)	0.2%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%
Party Activist	0.2%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%

Main Role	NUTS III								NUTS II							
	Border	Dublin		Mid East		Mid		South		West	Not Stated	Eastern and Midland		Northern and Southern		Not Stated
Advocate	27.9%	37.6%	27.4%	20.0%	23.3%	22.8%	28.6%	37.0%	33.3%	30.8%	31.8%	24.2%	33.3%			
Fixer / Problem-Solver	27.9%	18.8%	20.5%	30.0%	27.9%	31.6%	32.1%	30.4%	37.0%	21.4%	29.0%	31.4%	37.0%			
Civic leader	16.4%	11.8%	23.3%	22.5%	18.6%	33.3%	17.9%	17.4%	14.8%	17.4%	16.8%	24.8%	14.8%			
Information conduit	3.3%	7.1%	2.7%	10.0%	2.3%	3.5%	5.4%	2.2%	3.7%	4.5%	2.8%	5.9%	3.7%			
Initiator of Action	3.3%	2.4%	5.5%	5.0%	16.3%	3.5%	0.0%	4.3%	0.0%	6.5%	3.7%	2.6%	0.0%			
Political Activist	11.5%	8.2%	5.5%	2.5%	0.0%	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	3.7%	5.5%	6.5%	1.3%	3.7%			
Place-shaper	3.3%	5.9%	2.7%	2.5%	2.3%	1.8%	1.8%	0.0%	7.4%	4.0%	1.9%	2.0%	7.4%			
Decision-maker	4.9%	3.5%	2.7%	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.4%	2.2%	0.0%	2.5%	3.7%	3.3%	0.0%			
Policy-maker	1.6%	3.5%	4.1%	0.0%	2.3%	0.0%	5.4%	2.2%	0.0%	3.5%	1.9%	2.0%	0.0%			
Mediator / Negotiator	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	2.3%	1.8%	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%			
Plan-maker	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	2.3%	0.0%	0.0%	4.3%	0.0%	1.0%	1.9%	0.0%	0.0%			
Form-filler (for constituents)	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	2.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%			
Overseer	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%			
Legislator (law-maker)	0.0%	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%			
Party Activist	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%			

D1.2: Councillors' perceptions of changes in their role

Statement	All Respondents	Gender		Length of Service							Third-Level		
		Female	Male	0 to 5 yrs.	6 to 10	11 to 15	16 to 20	20+ yrs.	Up to 10	10+	Yes	No	
The role of the councillor is changing very rapidly, and it can be difficult to keep pace with the changes.	45.05%	45.70%	45.32%	39%	47%	48%	63%	43%	42%	50%	39%	51%	
The role of the councillor is changing gradually, and I am able to keep pace with the changes.	24.04%	18.54%	27.19%	23%	25%	25%	14%	33%	23%	25%	27%	21%	
The role of the councillor remains constant and steady.	8.89%	8.61%	8.76%	14%	6%	9%	4%	5%	11%	6%	11%	7%	
The role of the councillor is being eclipsed or fading.	22.02%	27.15%	18.73%	24%	22%	17%	20%	20%	23%	19%	22%	21%	

Statement	NUTS III										NUTS II			
	Border	Dublin	Mid East	Mid West		Midlands	South East		South West	West	Not Stated	Eastern and Midland	Northern and Western	Not Stated
The role of the councillor is changing very rapidly, and it can be difficult to keep pace with the changes.	50%	44%	38%	63%	48%	47%	40%	43%	36%	43%	47%	48%	36%	
The role of the councillor is changing gradually, and I am able to keep pace with the changes.	27%	20%	25%	15%	25%	21%	33%	30%	18%	23%	29%	24%	18%	
The role of the councillor remains constant and steady.	5%	17%	10%	10%	7%	10%	9%	2%	0%	12%	4%	10%	0%	
The role of the councillor is being eclipsed or fading.	18%	19%	28%	12%	20%	22%	19%	24%	46%	22%	20%	18%	46%	

D1.3: Extent to which councillors agree or disagree with given statements about their roles

Statement	Level of Agreement / Disagreement	All Respondents	Gender		Length of Service							Third-Level	
			Female	Male	0 to 5 yrs.	6 to 10	11 to 15	16 to 20	20+ yrs.	Up to 10	10+	Yes	No
8.1. The primary role of the councillor is to be a voice for constituents.	Strongly Agree	77.8%	74.5%	79.3%	76.1%	77.9%	78.8%	83.9%	75.9%	76.7%	78.9%	75.0%	80.3%
	Agree	20.2%	23.5%	18.9%	20.7%	19.2%	19.7%	16.1%	24.1%	20.1%	20.6%	22.3%	18.4%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	1.4%	2.0%	0.9%	2.2%	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.4%	0.0%	2.0%	0.8%
	Disagree	0.6%	0.0%	0.9%	1.1%	0.0%	1.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.5%	0.8%	0.4%
	Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
8.2 I am under pressure to attend events.	Strongly Agree	16.6%	20.9%	14.7%	17.9%	18.3%	25.8%	10.7%	9.2%	18.1%	14.8%	21.1%	12.1%
	Agree	35.4%	32.0%	36.0%	36.4%	43.3%	19.7%	33.9%	37.9%	38.9%	31.1%	32.4%	38.5%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	29.6%	26.1%	31.8%	29.3%	26.0%	34.8%	33.9%	26.4%	28.1%	31.1%	29.7%	30.1%
	Disagree	16.0%	19.6%	14.4%	15.8%	9.6%	15.2%	17.9%	23.0%	13.5%	19.1%	15.2%	16.3%
	Strongly Disagree	2.4%	1.3%	3.0%	0.5%	2.9%	4.5%	3.6%	3.4%	1.4%	3.8%	1.6%	2.9%
8.3 I would like to be a member of Dáil Éireann	Strongly Agree	22.2%	28.1%	19.8%	31.5%	26.0%	13.6%	12.5%	11.5%	29.5%	12.4%	28.1%	15.9%
	Agree	19.4%	18.3%	19.5%	22.8%	21.2%	19.7%	16.1%	11.5%	22.2%	15.3%	19.9%	19.2%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	27.2%	30.7%	25.8%	23.9%	24.0%	27.3%	37.5%	31.0%	24.0%	31.6%	28.5%	26.4%
	Disagree	17.0%	13.1%	18.3%	12.5%	13.5%	21.2%	23.2%	23.0%	12.8%	22.5%	13.3%	19.7%
	Strongly Disagree	14.2%	9.8%	16.5%	9.2%	15.4%	18.2%	10.7%	23.0%	11.5%	18.2%	10.2%	18.8%
8.4 I enjoy being a Councillor	Strongly Agree	55.2%	52.9%	57.1%	47.3%	50.0%	56.1%	66.1%	71.3%	48.3%	65.1%	47.3%	62.8%
	Agree	34.6%	36.6%	33.6%	38.6%	37.5%	33.3%	32.1%	25.3%	38.2%	29.7%	39.1%	30.5%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	7.2%	6.5%	7.2%	9.2%	9.6%	9.1%	0.0%	2.3%	9.4%	3.8%	9.4%	5.0%
	Disagree	2.6%	3.9%	1.8%	4.3%	2.9%	1.5%	1.8%	0.0%	3.8%	1.0%	3.5%	1.7%
	Strongly Disagree	0.4%	0.0%	0.3%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	0.3%	0.5%	0.8%	0.0%
8.5. Our representative role enables me to better perform my statutory roles.	Strongly Agree	40.6%	39.9%	41.4%	33.2%	38.5%	37.9%	48.2%	56.3%	35.1%	48.3%	35.5%	45.2%
	Agree	34.8%	30.1%	37.2%	37.5%	31.7%	39.4%	33.9%	31.0%	35.4%	34.4%	34.8%	35.6%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	18.4%	20.9%	16.5%	20.7%	24.0%	19.7%	14.3%	8.0%	21.9%	13.4%	22.7%	13.8%
	Disagree	5.4%	8.5%	3.9%	8.2%	4.8%	1.5%	3.6%	3.4%	6.9%	2.9%	6.3%	4.6%
	Strongly Disagree	0.8%	0.7%	0.9%	0.5%	1.0%	1.5%	0.0%	1.1%	0.7%	1.0%	0.8%	0.8%

Statement	Level of Agreement / Disagreement	NUTS III										NUTS II			
		Border	Dublin	Mid East	Mid West	Midlands	South East	South West	West	Not Stated	Eastern and Midland	Northern and Western	Not Stated		
8.1. The primary role of the councillor is to be a voice for constituents.	Strongly Agree	80.6%	64.0%	75.3%	79.1%	82.6%	77.6%	81.0%	89.1%	85.7%	72.2%	84.3%	79.2%	85.7%	
	Agree	19.4%	27.9%	24.7%	20.9%	13.0%	22.4%	17.2%	10.9%	14.3%	23.4%	15.7%	20.1%	14.3%	
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	0.0%	4.7%	0.0%	0.0%	4.3%	0.0%	1.7%	0.0%	0.0%	2.9%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	
	Disagree	0.0%	3.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
	Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
8.2 I am under pressure to attend events.	Strongly Agree	16.1%	20.9%	15.1%	7.0%	21.7%	19.0%	17.2%	15.2%	10.7%	19.0%	15.7%	15.1%	10.7%	
	Agree	38.7%	24.4%	41.1%	51.2%	34.8%	29.3%	34.5%	39.1%	32.1%	32.7%	38.9%	37.1%	32.1%	
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	32.3%	25.6%	27.4%	23.3%	21.7%	34.5%	37.9%	28.3%	39.3%	25.4%	30.6%	32.7%	39.3%	
	Disagree	11.3%	24.4%	15.1%	14.0%	21.7%	17.2%	10.3%	10.9%	14.3%	20.5%	11.1%	13.8%	14.3%	
	Strongly Disagree	1.6%	4.7%	1.4%	4.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	6.5%	3.6%	2.4%	3.7%	1.3%	3.6%	
8.3 I would like to be a member of Dáil Éireann	Strongly Agree	16.1%	25.6%	15.1%	18.6%	28.3%	22.4%	17.2%	10.9%	17.9%	22.4%	13.9%	19.5%	17.9%	
	Agree	19.4%	12.8%	17.8%	32.6%	17.4%	10.3%	15.5%	15.2%	17.9%	15.6%	17.6%	18.2%	17.9%	
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	29.0%	23.3%	28.8%	20.9%	17.4%	32.8%	29.3%	32.6%	32.1%	23.9%	30.6%	28.3%	32.1%	
	Disagree	17.7%	25.6%	20.5%	14.0%	19.6%	25.9%	25.9%	23.9%	25.0%	22.4%	20.4%	22.6%	25.0%	
	Strongly Disagree	17.7%	12.8%	17.8%	14.0%	17.4%	8.6%	12.1%	17.4%	7.1%	15.6%	17.6%	11.3%	7.1%	
8.4 I enjoy being a Councillor	Strongly Agree	59.7%	45.3%	47.9%	69.8%	58.7%	65.5%	53.4%	60.9%	39.3%	49.3%	60.2%	62.3%	39.3%	
	Agree	32.3%	38.4%	35.6%	27.9%	30.4%	31.0%	34.5%	34.8%	50.0%	35.6%	33.3%	31.4%	50.0%	
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	6.5%	10.5%	9.6%	2.3%	10.9%	1.7%	8.6%	4.3%	7.1%	10.2%	5.6%	4.4%	7.1%	
	Disagree	1.6%	3.5%	6.8%	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%	3.4%	0.0%	3.6%	3.9%	0.9%	1.9%	3.6%	
	Strongly Disagree	0.0%	2.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
8.5. Our representative role enables me to better perform my statutory roles.	Strongly Agree	33.9%	33.7%	32.9%	39.5%	47.8%	51.7%	53.4%	47.8%	25.0%	36.6%	39.8%	49.1%	25.0%	
	Agree	45.2%	34.9%	39.7%	37.2%	26.1%	32.8%	25.9%	28.3%	42.9%	34.6%	38.0%	31.4%	42.9%	
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	11.3%	22.1%	23.3%	18.6%	19.6%	13.8%	15.5%	15.2%	28.6%	22.0%	13.0%	15.7%	28.6%	
	Disagree	8.1%	8.1%	4.1%	2.3%	6.5%	1.7%	5.2%	6.5%	3.6%	6.3%	7.4%	3.1%	3.6%	
	Strongly Disagree	1.6%	1.2%	0.0%	2.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%	0.0%	0.5%	1.9%	0.6%	0.0%	

Annex D2.1 Impacts of being a councillor on aspects of one's personal life and well-being by NUTS III Region

Statement	Level of Agreement / Disagreement	NUTS III								
		Border	Dublin	Mid East	Mid West	Midlands	South East	South West	West	Not Stated
10. Ability to Earn Income	5	29.0%	42.4%	23.3%	46.5%	21.7%	37.5%	36.8%	34.8%	42.9%
	4	21.0%	22.4%	20.5%	20.9%	17.4%	19.6%	19.3%	15.2%	14.3%
	3	14.5%	15.3%	13.7%	7.0%	19.6%	19.6%	22.8%	17.4%	17.9%
	2	12.9%	5.9%	17.8%	2.3%	8.7%	10.7%	10.5%	13.0%	3.6%
	1	6.5%	4.7%	5.5%	7.0%	6.5%	3.6%	3.5%	4.3%	7.1%
	0	16.1%	9.4%	19.2%	16.3%	26.1%	8.9%	7.0%	15.2%	14.3%
11. My Business	5	21.6%	5.7%	16.4%	28.1%	16.7%	18.8%	18.6%	20.0%	27.8%
	4	15.7%	15.1%	18.2%	28.1%	22.2%	16.7%	25.6%	17.5%	33.3%
	3	17.6%	17.0%	16.4%	3.1%	19.4%	12.5%	18.6%	15.0%	5.6%
	2	13.7%	5.7%	9.1%	9.4%	8.3%	20.8%	4.7%	12.5%	5.6%
	1	9.8%	9.4%	3.6%	3.1%	2.8%	8.3%	2.3%	7.5%	5.6%
	0	21.6%	47.2%	36.4%	28.1%	30.6%	22.9%	30.2%	27.5%	22.2%
12. My Family Life	5	30.0%	25.9%	25.0%	34.9%	15.2%	29.8%	25.9%	28.3%	32.1%
	4	20.0%	31.8%	33.3%	27.9%	23.9%	21.1%	36.2%	21.7%	35.7%
	3	26.7%	17.6%	18.1%	9.3%	23.9%	28.1%	24.1%	26.1%	10.7%
	2	13.3%	15.3%	12.5%	11.6%	17.4%	8.8%	10.3%	21.7%	14.3%
	1	10.0%	2.4%	4.2%	11.6%	6.5%	8.8%	3.4%	0.0%	3.6%
	0	0.0%	7.1%	6.9%	4.7%	13.0%	3.5%	0.0%	2.2%	3.6%
13. My General Wellbeing	5	16.4%	16.3%	19.2%	18.6%	11.1%	14.0%	12.1%	15.6%	21.4%
	4	13.1%	18.6%	20.5%	18.6%	22.2%	19.3%	25.9%	31.1%	21.4%
	3	31.1%	31.4%	30.1%	20.9%	22.2%	29.8%	32.8%	24.4%	21.4%
	2	18.0%	16.3%	16.4%	20.9%	13.3%	15.8%	12.1%	11.1%	14.3%
	1	11.5%	8.1%	6.8%	11.6%	11.1%	10.5%	10.3%	13.3%	10.7%
	0	9.8%	9.3%	6.8%	9.3%	20.0%	10.5%	6.9%	4.4%	10.7%
14. My Mental Health	5	16.7%	20.2%	13.7%	18.6%	8.9%	10.5%	14.0%	10.9%	14.3%
	4	11.7%	15.5%	24.7%	11.6%	20.0%	10.5%	19.3%	21.7%	28.6%
	3	23.3%	29.8%	24.7%	23.3%	20.0%	21.1%	31.6%	26.1%	10.7%
	2	20.0%	14.3%	13.7%	11.6%	15.6%	19.3%	7.0%	15.2%	21.4%
	1	15.0%	10.7%	15.1%	14.0%	13.3%	28.1%	21.1%	13.0%	7.1%
	0	13.3%	9.5%	8.2%	20.9%	22.2%	10.5%	7.0%	13.0%	17.9%
15. My Physical Health	5	11.5%	9.3%	12.3%	14.0%	13.3%	7.0%	8.8%	8.7%	7.4%
	4	18.0%	11.6%	16.4%	14.0%	8.9%	12.3%	17.5%	19.6%	18.5%
	3	23.0%	27.9%	26.0%	20.9%	24.4%	24.6%	35.1%	26.1%	7.4%
	2	27.9%	17.4%	16.4%	20.9%	13.3%	15.8%	12.3%	15.2%	33.3%
	1	6.6%	14.0%	15.1%	18.6%	20.0%	17.5%	19.3%	17.4%	14.8%
	0	13.1%	19.8%	13.7%	11.6%	20.0%	22.8%	7.0%	13.0%	18.5%
16. My Private Life	5	37.7%	20.9%	23.9%	23.3%	17.4%	29.8%	22.4%	23.9%	22.2%
	4	19.7%	27.9%	28.2%	39.5%	28.3%	12.3%	43.1%	23.9%	18.5%
	3	18.0%	19.8%	21.1%	14.0%	21.7%	28.1%	20.7%	28.3%	37.0%
	2	14.8%	16.3%	14.1%	14.0%	15.2%	17.5%	6.9%	17.4%	11.1%
	1	6.6%	7.0%	8.5%	4.7%	13.0%	3.5%	1.7%	4.3%	7.4%
	0	3.3%	8.1%	4.2%	4.7%	4.3%	8.8%	5.2%	2.2%	3.7%
17. My Social Life	5	27.4%	17.6%	20.8%	27.9%	23.9%	21.1%	17.2%	13.0%	17.9%
	4	22.6%	25.9%	31.9%	20.9%	21.7%	19.3%	24.1%	28.3%	28.6%
	3	24.2%	25.9%	22.2%	27.9%	19.6%	22.8%	31.0%	26.1%	17.9%
	2	12.9%	14.1%	13.9%	14.0%	6.5%	15.8%	15.5%	23.9%	17.9%
	1	9.7%	10.6%	6.9%	4.7%	15.2%	10.5%	12.1%	6.5%	14.3%
	0	3.2%	5.9%	4.2%	4.7%	13.0%	10.5%	0.0%	2.2%	3.6%
18. My Work Life Balance	5	32.3%	37.6%	33.3%	37.2%	20.0%	33.3%	36.2%	15.2%	40.7%
	4	25.8%	27.1%	20.8%	16.3%	31.1%	12.3%	27.6%	34.8%	22.2%
	3	16.1%	12.9%	26.4%	23.3%	20.0%	29.8%	27.6%	30.4%	11.1%
	2	12.9%	10.6%	6.9%	16.3%	15.6%	12.3%	8.6%	10.9%	11.1%
	1	8.1%	4.7%	9.7%	2.3%	6.7%	3.5%	0.0%	2.2%	11.1%
	0	4.8%	7.1%	2.8%	4.7%	6.7%	8.8%	0.0%	6.5%	3.7%

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End Notes

Chapter 1

ⁱ These consist of: 26 county councils, 3 city councils, and 2 city and county councils (as further elaborated in Chapter 3).

ⁱⁱ See <https://21stcenturypublicservant.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/21st-century-councillor.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ 'A combined authority (CA) is a legal body set up using national legislation that enables a group of two or more councils to collaborate and take /collective decisions across council boundaries' (Local Government Association, UK).

Chapter 2

^{iv} The Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments was established by Minister for the Environment and Local Government, Noel Dempsey in November 1997, and held 917 days of public hearings with 400 witnesses. Its initial remit was to inquire into the planning history and ownership of 726 acres of land in north Dublin and to investigate any payments to politicians or officials in connection with its rezoning. Its terms of reference were soon expanded to allow for the investigation of all suspect payments to politicians and local authority officials in connection with a spate of rezonings in Dublin.

^v Among Mahon's recommendations were the enactment of whistleblower legislation, the establishment of the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR), a register of lobbyists and expanded disclosure requirements for public officials.

^{vi} The countries covered by this study were in Western Europe and Scandinavia, but Ireland was not included.

^{vii} The following are among the other governance structures on which councillors sit: Local Community Safety Partnerships (currently being piloted in place of Joint Policing Committees); Local Sports Partnerships; Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee; and special-purpose committees e.g. Decade of Commemorations Working Groups.

^{viii} The Women's Manifesto Project aims to reconnect women with the democratic process in their own communities and counties. An innovative programme from Longford Women's Link, it is based on a model of positive engagement developed in Longford between Longford Women's Manifesto Group and local decision-makers. For further details see <https://www.lwl.ie/services/women-in-political-life/womens-manifesto-project/>

^{ix} See <https://www.seeherelected.ie/>

^x The SHE programme has devised and delivered innovative and award-winning free on-line courses and workshops, and it has produced the free SHE Guide to Running in the 2024 Local Elections.

^{xi} The government circulars to local authorities, in New South Wales, can be accessed on: <https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/council-circulars/18-46-new-councillor-induction-and-professional-development-requirements/>

Chapter 3

^{xii} The OECD has thirty-four member countries. Along with Ireland, those that have only one tier of elected sub-national government are as follows: Estonia; Finland; Iceland; Israel; Luxembourg; and Slovenia. Of these, only Finland (pop. 5.5 million) and Portugal (pop. 10.3 million) are more populous than Ireland (pop. 5.1 million).

^{xiii} For information about the Committee of the Regions Decentralisation Index, please see: <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/Decentralization-Index.aspx?countryName=ireland>

^{xiv} For details of councillors' powers, please see Sections 21 and 131 of the Local Government (Reform) Act, 2014: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/1/section/21/enacted/en/html#sec21>

For a commentary about councillors' roles, please see Callanan (2018), Chapter 4.

^{xv} The report card had not been published at the time of writing, but its contents were covered in the national media. See, for example: <https://www.businesspost.ie/news/local-government-system-in-ireland-among-the-least-representative-in-europe-report/> and <https://www.independent.ie/regional/cork/news/local-government-in-ireland-lacks-funds-power-council-of-europe-report/a471784602.html>

^{xvi} The CLRAE report was ratified at the 45th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities on 24-26 October 2023.

^{xvii} In 2003, the Committee of Ministers defined balanced participation in its Recommendation (2003)3 as the minimum representation of 40% of both sexes in all decision-making bodies in political or public life. This requirement has been reaffirmed in the Council of Europe Equality Strategy 2014- 2017 and in the current Equality Strategy (2018-2023): <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/gender-equality-strategy>.

Chapter 4

^{xviii} The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy provides records of election results (including the number of seats) in several countries.

^{xix} The total number of responses may exceed the total number of respondents, as this was an open-ended question, and all answers were factored into the data analysis.

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^x All interviewees were assured of their anonymity. Identifiable information has been removed from this quotation to protect the identity of the councillor.

^{xi} All interviewees were assured of their anonymity. Identifiable information has been removed from this quotation to protect the identity of the councillor.

^{xii} All interviewees were assured of their anonymity. Identifiable information has been removed from this quotation to protect the identity of the councillor.

^{xiii} For information about An Coimisiún Toghcháin, please see its website: <https://www.electoralcommission.ie/>

^{xiv} All interviewees were assured of their anonymity. Identifiable information has been removed from this quotation to protect the identity of the councillor.

^{xv} O'Mahony, K. (2021) 'Pressure of 24/7 councillor role led to Lombard's quitting' The Southern Star, 21 April 2021.

^{xvi} Ryan, P. (2020) 'Green Party councillor quits citing poor pay and conditions' Irish Independent, 10 August 2020.

^{xvii} All interviewees were assured of their anonymity. Identifiable information has been removed from this quotation to protect the identity of the councillor.

^{xviii} The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998 governs the role of local authorities in respect of Traveller accommodation.

^{xix} Prior to 2014, citizens who lived in areas covered by a town council had two votes; they could vote in town council and county council elections, while those who lived outside of town council areas could only vote in county council elections.

^{xx} All interviewees were assured of their anonymity. Identifiable information has been removed from this quotation to protect the identity of the councillor.

^{xxi} This scheme was introduced subsequent to administration of the questionnaire.

^{xxii} For details of these changes, please see the 'Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee No. 1 Report 2018', available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/80784/df8d36da-3522-401d-99e7-83794d90e148.pdf> and

'Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee No. 2 Report 2018', available at: <https://www.boundarycommittee.ie/reports/LEA%20BC%20No.%202%20Report%20-%20FINAL%20WEBSITE%20MASTER%20COPY.pdf>

^{xxiii} The question was worded as follows: Would you like to see any of the following devolved from central government to local government?

^{xxiv} All interviewees were assured of their anonymity. Identifiable information has been removed from this quotation to protect the identity of the councillor.

^{xxv} All interviewees were assured of their anonymity. Identifiable information has been removed from this quotation to protect the identity of the contributor.

^{xxvi} For further details of the draft Bill and its second stage reading in September 2023, see <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2023-09-20/18/#:~:text=The%20Bill%20provides%20for%20the,functions%20conferred%20under%20the%20Bill>

^{xxvii} All interviewees were assured of their anonymity. Identifiable information has been removed from this quotation to protect the identity of the contributor.

^{xxviii} All interviewees were assured of their anonymity. Identifiable information has been removed from this quotation to protect the identity of the contributor.

^{xxix} COSLA describes itself as a 'councillor-led, cross-party organisation who champions councils' vital work to secure the resources and powers they need'. For further information, please see: <https://www.cosla.gov.uk/about-cosla>

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Front cover image @Cork County Council.

Image p.ii-iii @Maynooth University.

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