

# Building Stronger Local Government

Community-Led... Locally Driven

*Enhanced Local Democracy,  
Stronger Local Government,  
Better Local Services.*



*AILG's Policy Vision for Local Government  
Local Government Manifesto for General Election 2024/2025*



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# Who We Are

The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) is the primary national body representing the 949 democratically elected local authority members across Ireland and our 31 local authority member councils. Our goal is to represent the collective interests of the elected members of the local authorities, which constitute its membership.

As the representative voice of local government in Ireland, AILG aims to protect and support democratic local government and promote democratic leadership of our elected councillors and our elected councils. A strong democratic local government system is vital in order to promote the welfare and good government of the people of Ireland.



# Introduction & Executive Summary

Our local government system in Ireland has experienced significant reform in recent years. While that reform has impacted on the structure, functions, resources and organisation of the local government system, the basic purpose of local government has not changed.

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**The key purpose of local government is to promote the well-being and quality of life of citizens and communities, through effective, accountable representation, and efficient performance of functions and delivery of services. ”**

Outside of the Oireachtas, local authorities are the only bodies whose members are elected by direct vote of the electorate. They are also the only form of government in which everyone can participate irrespective of citizenship – everyone whose name is on the register of electors and who is qualified to vote can exercise their democratic rights at local elections. Councillors are elected by local people to make local decisions, to articulate local views and to identify and meet local requirements. They adopt policies that reflect the needs and legitimate expectations of the people who elect them. A key element of local government is that elected members and staff act in the interests of the people being served,

seeking to meet their needs and give them the best possible quality of life.

Following the June 2024 local elections, a start of a new 5- year council term and a national election due within the coming months, this is an opportune time to have an honest conversation about the future of our local democracy and local government system. The upcoming general election and new government programme will provide an opportunity to devolve more powers and responsibilities to local authorities and appropriate support to Councillors in carrying out their important roles.

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**A strong democratically led local government system is vital to promote the welfare and good government of the people of Ireland. ”**

For 125 years, local authorities have successfully served and provided for the Irish population. Our local authorities have a strong record of achievement across all areas of services that are provided at local level. The experience and contribution of local authority members has been and remains central to such achievement and thus the role needs to be recognised, underpinned and emphasised in any future reform efforts directed by the outcome of this particular review process.

# Introduction & Executive Summary

The Association has played a significant role in recent years in improving supports for individual Councillors and the collective Councillor body. It has also enhanced its role in shaping national policy, particularly regarding terms and conditions, thematic policy developments, and revisions to the overall policy framework applied to the delivery of local government services. This includes promoting citizen-based actions and increasing local participation from communities and interest groups.

In response, the Association has produced a wide range of policy and practice papers. These papers support the role of Councillors and highlight the importance of the local government sector at both local and national policy levels.

For 125 years, local authorities have successfully served and provided for the Irish population. Our local authorities have a strong record of achievement across all areas of services that are provided at local level. The experience and contribution of local authority members has been and remains central to such achievement and thus the role needs to be recognised, underpinned and emphasised in any future reform efforts directed by the outcome of this particular review process.

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**Consequently, the AILG is exceptionally well-placed to contribute its insights on the future role of elected members and the broader role of local government in delivering both local and national services, while also playing a key role in sustaining local democracy.** ”



# Recommendations

## Overview of the Irish Local Government System and Structures

- Resources to be provided to facilitate Councillors and Council officials to co-design and roll-out a national public awareness campaign on the role of the Councillor and local government.

## Current Role of the Elected Member & Council Executive

- Need 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.

## Council of Europe Monitoring Report on the Irish Local Government System

- A new Programme for Government commits to immediately implementing the recommendations of the Council of Europe Monitoring Report.

## Strengthening Local Government Structures at County and Sub-County Level

- Consolidate and strengthen the electoral and decision-making functions of Municipal Districts.
- Area Committees in the local authorities of Cork City, Galway City and the four Dublin Local Authorities of Dublin City, Fingal, Dún Laoghaire- Rathdown and South Dublin be put on the same statutory footing as Municipal Districts.
- While Municipal Districts are considered to have improved spatial representation across the State, they have yet to fully fulfil their potential as local democratic platforms. An independent examination of their role, structures and responsibilities should be undertaken with the objective of moving person centered services to the municipal level along with the underpinning of increased financial autonomy and finance powers, greater democratic oversight and Chief Executive responsibilities.

# Recommendations

## Enhancing Local Authority Functions & Responsibilities

- Central Government to examine devolving more powers to the local authorities through the legislative process to strengthen and enhance local democracy and the delivery of additional local services.
- An independent review of the objectives of Putting People First should be undertaken to determine what has been implemented and what remains to be applied, taking into account the commitment that “separate structures for delivery of public services will not be established outside of local government unless clearly necessitated in exceptional circumstances.”
- A reform programme that would provide for greater Councillor oversight of public services beyond those within the existing mandate of local government should be examined and delivered. Local democracy has limited oversight of key local services such as local and community development, housing, water and waste water provision, childcare and primary education, primary healthcare, etc. This is a major gap in the application of local democracy and should be a minimum requirement within the Programme for Government.
- All government departments and public agencies delivering a service at local level (either directly or through a Service Level Agreement with the local authority) should be accountable to the elected council. Examples include Úisce Éireann, TII, Local Link, HSE, AHBs etc.
- All local representative groups to be accountable to the elected council either at plenary or MD level e.g. Town Teams etc.
- Urgent review of the definition of the policy role of the elected council.
- Specific arrangements to provide access for Councillors to relevant Departments and Agencies should be put in place along with appropriate telephone access.



# Recommendations

## Expanding Powers of the Elected Council & Local Councillors

- Immediately reverse the reserved functions/powers recently taken away from the elected council including the Section 183 function for disposal of council-owned land to the Land Development Agency for housing developments and the Part 8 reserved function for local authority own housing developments. This would demonstrate the Ministers and Government's commitment to strengthening local government and democratically elected local government.
- Review of the default provision under section 149 of the 2001 Act, which states that every function of a local authority which is not a reserved function is an executive function and therefore grants the CE power to act unless powers are specifically assigned to the elected council.
- Mandate that all government departments and public agencies recognise the important role and contribution of Councillors. This should include the establishment of CCO Officers (Council Communications Officers) in all government departments and public agencies to liaise directly with local Councillors.
- Enable Councillors to 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.

## Importance of the Elected Council Governance & Oversight Role

- Strengthen Section 151 of the Local Government Act 2001 (as amended) in relation to Managers Orders to ensure greater oversight of the elected council in relation to the exercise of executive functions.
- Strengthen Section 126 of the Local Government Act 2001 (as amended) in relation to the work of NOAC (National Oversight and Audit Committee) to mandate them to engage with the elected council (or representatives of the elected council e.g. the CPG) when undertaking their evaluation of the performance of a local authority.
- Working in conjunction with the AILG's Elected Member Training and Education Programme, ensure that all Elected Members receive appropriate training on their governance and oversight role including the new Local Government Code of Governance.

# Recommendations

## Local Authority Funding, Finance & Expenditure

- A review of the overall position of local government finance needs to be undertaken having regard to the need for a sustainable financial environment. This should include examining additional local revenue raising powers for the Elected Members. Therefore it is recommended that a multi sector task force with international input be commissioned to undertake this review.
- 100% of Local Property Tax collected in a local authority area should be allocated back to the relevant authority for general purpose spending for the provision of local services.

## Representation and Number of Councillors

- Electoral Commission to carry out an immediate review of voter participation post the 2024 local elections to include public awareness of misinformation, disinformation and manipulative behavior during the local election period. Need to establish educational and information programmes to help address these issues.
- The current level of membership in councils is well behind European averages. Any move to expansion in membership does however need to be reasonable and be cognisant of the need to expand the responsibilities of elected members in the first instance.
- A scheme that provides for a sustainable level of Councillor representation, given population growth, needs to be examined. Ideally, consideration of proportional allocation of council membership in line with the Councillor to electorate ratios applied under Putting People First should be considered and applied as part of an overall reconfiguration of local electoral areas prior to the next local government elections in 2029.

## Councillor Supports - Pay and Non-Pay Supports

- Councillor's allowances such as the various Cathaoirleach/Committee Chair allowances should be index linked on an on-going basis. These allowances have remained static since they were first introduced.
- Additional family-friendly measures to enable a greater diversity and gender participation at local government level.
- Implementation of the remaining Moorhead Non-Pay supports as recommended in her report on the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members.

# Recommendations

- Employers should be required to allow for Councillor attendance at meetings and training required for Councillor purposes.

## **Training and Education for Councillors**

- Support and Resource AILG's Training and Education Programme to respond to councillors' growing recognition of the importance of, and growing need for, training and continuous professional development (CPD).

## **Housing and Homelessness – 'Building Homes...Building Hope'**

- Role of the local authority, as the housing authority in each city and county and as lead providers of social housing throughout Ireland, must be reinforced in order to fully address the housing current crisis.
- Greater emphasis must be placed on a more ambitious, nation-wide local authority house building programme to include both acquisitions and a new build programme and the delivery target of social housing units to 15,000 local authority/AHB social housing units per annum for the period 2025 – 2030.
- Local authorities must be provided with financial resources to invest in direct estate maintenance and social care workers to provide the proper care services to their tenants.
- Local authorities to have a dedicated ring-fenced rolling budget on an annual basis for pre-letting repairs costs.
- Need to further streamline approval procedures for social housing projects in order to fast track these projects for quicker delivery including;
  - Funding for appropriate technical staff to be included in the capital costs of housing projects to ensure that no housing projects are delayed due to a lack of technical expertise.
  - Propose that the shared services model currently operating successfully in the Irish local government environment should be employed to rapidly scale-up the input of specialist housing personnel with local authorities across various regions.
- The immediate conferring of the reserved function to approve a local authority differential rents scheme under section 31 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.

# Recommendations

## **Continued Growth of AILG - The National Representative Body for Councillors**

- AILG currently faces limitations in resources and staffing. This needs to be addressed to strengthen its ability to deliver continuous professional development and education for members, produce the policy papers increasingly requested by national and local governments, and expand support services for members as they face growing pressures in their roles.
- Investigate the potential for the establishment of a panel of independent advisors / points of reference (via AILG) for Councillors to enable effective engagement with the more technical aspects of their role.
- Arrangements should be put in place to allow the Association Executive to have regular engagement with Government Ministers and Ministers of State and, in light of the expanding role of local government, with relevant Secretaries General and key State bodies responsible for the delivery of person centred services.

## **Supporting Gender and Diversity in Local Government**

- Resource and support the roll-out of the Regional Women's Caucus Network across all local authorities.

## **Working with People with Disabilities**

- Ensure that local government and our local authorities fulfill their responsibility to ensure the inclusion of disabled people in communities.



# Overview of the Irish Local Government System and Structures

In Ireland, each local authority is subdivided into Local Electoral Areas (LEAs) from which members are elected. National law defines the LEAs and the number of members to be elected for each local authority. There are 949 elected local authority members in total, distributed across county, city, and city and county authorities as follows:

- 26 County Councils, of which three are in Dublin (Fingal, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and South Dublin)
- 3 City Councils: Cork, Dublin and Galway
- 2 City and County councils: Limerick and Waterford.

At the sub-county level, municipal, borough, and metropolitan districts form a key tier of local government. Each county is divided into several Municipal Districts (MDs), which are made up of one or more Local Electoral Areas (LEAs). Councillors elected to a LEA have responsibilities within their designated Municipal District. There are 95 Municipal/Municipal Borough Districts in total. However, six local authorities—Cork City, Galway City, and the Dublin authorities (Dublin City, Fingal, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, and South Dublin)—do not use the Municipal District structure. Instead, they operate a combined total of 19 Area Committees, which handle local issues but lack the statutory or legal framework of MDs.

Local authorities are multi-purpose bodies responsible for delivering a wide range of important services.



**Local Authorities are the main vehicle of governance and public service delivery at local level, leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably.**

Local Authorities serve as the primary vehicle for governance and public service delivery at the local level. They lead economic, social, and community development, provide efficient and cost-effective services, and represent citizens and local communities in an effective and accountable manner. Additionally, Local Government plays a crucial role in implementing much of the government's policy at the local level. Local authority services are organised through the eight programme groups outlined on the following page.

## Local authorities currently deliver 1,105 services to citizens at local level on behalf of over 30 government departments and public agencies.

**1. Housing and Building Management** which includes the provision of local authority (social) housing and other housing supports, housing grants and assistance to persons housing themselves or improving their houses, traveller accommodation, homeless etc.

**2. Road Transportation and Safety**, including the upkeep, maintenance and improvement of roads, public lighting, car parking, traffic management facilities, road safety, collection of motor taxation and licensing of drivers, etc.

**3. Water Supply and Sewerage** including water supply and sewerage schemes, assistance for private water and sewerage facilities, public conveniences, etc. However, it must be noted that this major function of local authorities has been transferred in its entirety to a single state utility company in Irish Water (Uisce Éireann) since 2023.

**4. Development Incentives and Controls** which includes physical planning policy, control and enforcement of new development and building, promotion of industrial and other development, local economic development, local community development, public participation, tourism promotion, heritage and conservation services, etc.

**5. Environmental Protection** including waste management planning, waste collection and disposal, landfill sites, recycling facilities, litter control including street cleaning, burial grounds, safety of structures and places, fire protection, pollution control, etc.

**6. Recreation and Amenity** including provision and operation of swimming pools/leisure centres, libraries, parks and open spaces, recreation centres, conservation and improvement of amenities, arts activities, etc.

**7. Agriculture, Education, Health and Welfare** including education supports, land drainage costs, coastal protection, piers and harbours, veterinary services, etc.

**8. Miscellaneous Services** including financial management and commercial/business rate collection, elections, courthouses, coroners and inquests, consumer protection measures, markets & casual trading, local representation/civic leadership, etc.

### Recommendation

- Resources to be provided to facilitate Councillors and Council officials to co-design and roll-out a national public awareness campaign on the role of the Councillor and local government.

# Current Role of the Elected Member & Council Executive

Our local government system in Ireland is the most accessible form of democratically elected government in the country.

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**The public face of our local authorities are the democratically elected Councillors. The elected council is in law the policy-making arm of the local authority with Councillors having the role of creating the overall policy framework which dictate the overall direction and functioning of the local authority that the council's executive and staff work within.** ”

Aligned with that, a significant role of Councillors is to represent the views of their communities. They identify and track local problems and issues and bring this knowledge back into the council chamber to ensure better outcomes for the well-being and quality of life for the people and communities that they represent. The Councillor's role and responsibilities include representing the electoral area for which they are elected and the local authority as a whole, decision-making and developing and reviewing council policy, regulatory, quasi-judicial and statutory duties. They also have a key role in community leadership and engagement.

The performance of local authority functions are shared between the elected members and the chief executive, the elected members carrying out reserved functions and the chief executive carrying out executive functions. The powers of local authority members derive primarily from their reserved functions, which are performed at both Council and Municipal District level. Reserved functions primarily relate to issues of policy.

Examples of principal reserved functions include:

- Adoption of the Corporate Plan at the start of the term of the new council – the Corporate Plan sets the overall strategic direction of the council, its high-level objectives and goals.
- Disposal of land.
- Making a development plan under the Planning Acts and any variations to it.
- Adopting the annual budget, variations in the annual rate of valuation and variation in the level of Local Property Tax.
- Adopting a scheme of letting priorities for council housing.
- Making, amending or revoking bye-laws (e.g. parking, casual trading, etc.).
- Nominating persons to act on committees or on other public bodies.
- Approving the Annual Financial Statement and any areas of overexpenditure.
- Adopting the annual Schedule of Municipal District Works.

# Current Role of the Elected Member & Council Executive

Most of the major decisions of the local authority are reserved for the exclusive prerogative of the Councillors including oversight of the financial affairs of the authority. In addition to the reserved functions, Councillors have a role in overseeing and directing the activities of the local authority in general. The 2014 Reform Act introduced a structured reporting relationship between the Chief Executive and the Councillors.

It is implicit in their elected status that Councillors have the function of representing the people of their area. Councillors are directly elected by the people and therefore have a mandate from the people in relation to the communities they represent. They can initiate action to promote the community interest and are ideally placed to provide civic leadership.

The role of the Chief Executive is to ensure that resources in terms of personnel, finance, technology and information generally are deployed to implement government and council policies. Executive decisions relate to the day-to-day running of the local authority including staffing matters and the discharge of executive functions within the policy parameters as determined by the Councillors.

The Chief Executive ensures that the policy issues adopted by the Councillors are implemented. An important role of the Chief Executive is to advise the Councillors in the determination of policy in accordance with agreed national policy.

While there is a clear distinction in legislation in relation to reserved and executive functions in reality the system operates on the basis of a 'partnership' approach between the elected representatives, the Chief Executive and the staff.

## Recommendation

- Need 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.



# Council of Europe Monitoring Report on the Irish Local Government System

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation fostering the principles of human rights, democracy and rule of law. It includes 46 member states, 27 of which are members of the EU including Ireland. All Council Members have signed up to the European Convention of Human Rights, which protects human rights, democracy and the rule of law.



**The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE) is part of the Council of Europe. It is responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy with its member states and is responsible for assessing the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.**



The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities organises monitoring visits and drafts reports and recommendations on the state of local and regional democracy in the Member States concerned and also examines specific issues related to local and regional democracy. In April 2023, a monitoring mission to Ireland was conducted to monitor the application of the European Charter of Local Self Government. The Monitoring group engaged with a range stakeholders in the local government sector at both local and national level, including AILG.

AILG submitted a comprehensive evaluation of Ireland's local government system. The group's final report was formally adopted at the bi-annual Congress of Local and Regional Authorities on 25th October 2023 in Strasbourg.

The monitoring report is very damning of our centralised system of local government here in Ireland and in particular the imbalance between the powers of the Chief Executive and the democratically Elected Members. The report confirmed that *"although Ireland is a very solid democracy, it remains one of the most centralised countries in Europe"* and there is still a lot to be done before local self-government in Ireland is on par with other European countries.

The rapporteurs of the Report expressed concern over;

- The limited share of public affairs under local authorities' own responsibility and local authorities' limited own resources i.e. functions & finance.
- The imbalance between the elected members and the chief executives.
- Lack of a formalised and regular consultation as well as extensive & detailed administrative supervision.
- Members of regional assemblies are indirectly elected & are not accountable to the citizens for the decisions they take in the assembly.

# Council of Europe Monitoring Report on the Irish Local Government System

Section 38 of the report stated that *“in many respects the position of local government is weaker in Ireland than in most other European countries. They have a more limited set of functions, represent a smaller share of the public commitment, and can only marginally influence the size of their resources. The strong position of the chief executive also limits the role of the elected representatives.”*

Section 38 further stated that the **“Local Autonomy Index (LAI), which is a measure of the state of local self-government, confirms that Irish local government turns out as being among those with the lowest scores, with a rank only just above Hungary, the Russian Federation and Moldova. On a scale from 0 to 100, Ireland has an average score for the period 2015-2020 of 42, compared to an average of 57 among all investigated countries. The scoring is low on practically all dimensions of the index. The position has remained the same over time and was not affected by the reforms in 2014”.**

Finally, the report concluded by stating that during their visit they were informed that *“local government has been administrated and supported from this house (Customs House) for 200 years..... This was a telling way of expressing how central government views local government – something that is administrated and not primarily regarded as self-governing units”.*

The Report recommended, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, to;

- Transfer additional functions to local authorities, in particular within the area of public welfare;
- Continue with reforms that increase elected members’ influence over executive matters in all local authorities;
- To elect members of the regional assemblies directly;
- Introduce a system of formal and regular consultations between central and local government;
- Enhance local democratic control over the internal administrative structure of local government;
- Reduce administrative supervision;
- Increase the amount of own resources that can be used at the discretion of local government and that a larger share of the grants should not be earmarked.

The rapporteurs also recommended in their report, that Ireland sign and ratify the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207).

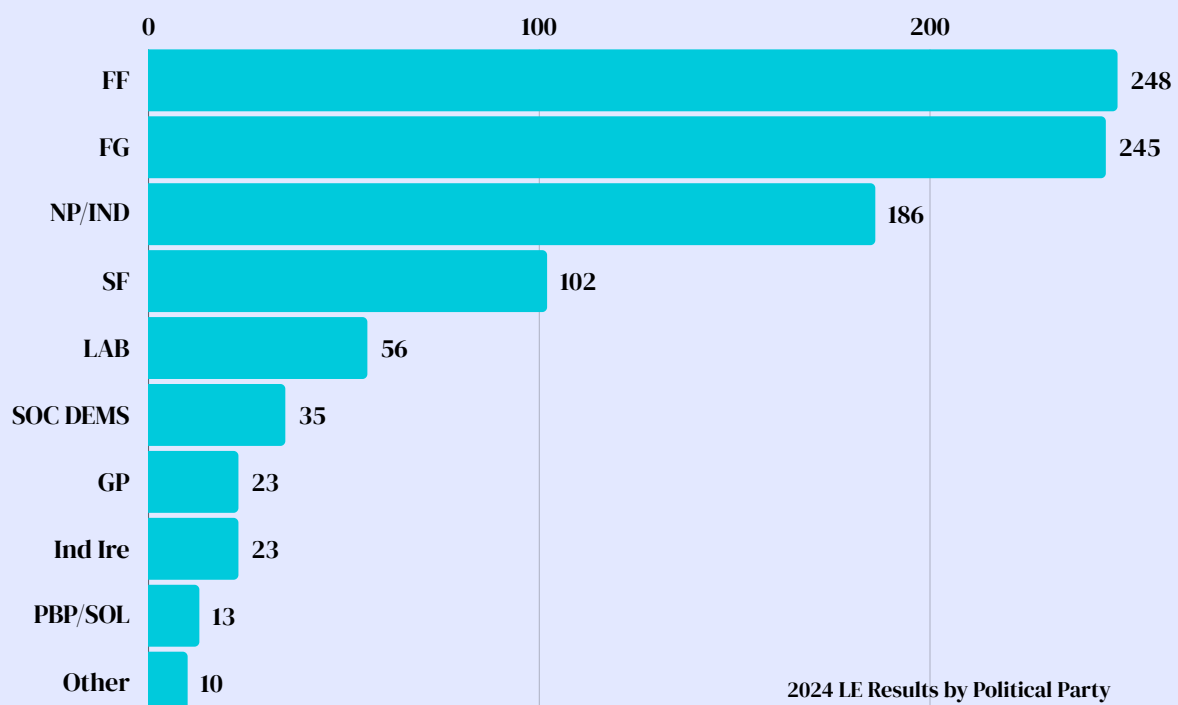
## Recommendation

- A new Programme for Government commits to immediately implementing the recommendations of the Council of Europe Monitoring Report.

# Overview of June 2024 Local Elections

## 2024 Local Election Results - Key Findings

- Fianna Fail remain the largest Party at local level in terms of elected Councillors at 248 (26%) However, this is down 31 seats (-11%) on their 2019 performance but down 27 members on their outgoing number of Councilors as at June 2024.
- Fine Gael and Green Party have seen a reduction in their number of Councillors, down 10 (-4%) and 26 (-53%) from 2019.
- Independents/Non-Party and Labour are level with their 2019 performance. However, Independents/Non-Party are down 10 members on their outgoing number of Councilors as at June 2024.
- Sinn Féin and Social Democrats have gained Councillors with Sinn Féin seeing an increase of 21 Councillors (26%) and Social Democrats nearly doubling their number of Councillors to 35 (84%).
- Independent Ireland elected 23 Councillors.
- AONTÚ AND PBP/SOL increased their representations to 8 and 13 Councillors respectively.
- Turnout was 49.03% down slightly from the 50.12% turnout in 2019. However, in the 20 year period since 2004 we have seen a continuous drop in turnout of -9.24% from 58.64% in 2004 to 49.03% in 2024.



# Overview of June 2024 Local Elections

## 2024 Local Election Results - Key Findings

		FF	FG	NP/Ind	SF	LAB	Social Dems	GP	PBP/ SOL	Aon	Ind Irel	Other
<b>LE 2024</b>	Cllr.	248	245	186	102	56	35	23	13	8	23	10
	%	26%	26%	20%	11%	6%	4%	2%	1%	1%	2%	1%
<b>LE 2019</b>	Cllr.	249	255	187	81	57	19	49	11	3	0	8
	%	29%	27%	20%	9%	6%	2%	5%	1%	0%	0%	1%
<b>Change</b>	Cllr.	-31	-10	-1	21	-1	16	-26%	2	5	23	2
	%	-11%	-4%	-1%	26%	-2%	84%	-53%	18%	167%		25%
<b>Outgoing 2024</b>		275	249	196	80	56	21	45	10	3	10	0
<b>Change</b>	Cllr.	-27%	-4	-10	22	0	14	-22	3	5	13	6



**Summary Councillors Elected by Local Authority – June 2024**

Local Authority	Total No. of Councillors	Male	Female	% Female
Carlow	18	16	2	11%
Cavan	18	13	5	28%
Clare	28	22	6	21%
Cork City	31	31	5	16%
Cork County	55	55	16	29%
Donegal	37	34	3	8%
Dublin City	63	38	25	40%
Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown	40	27	13	34%
Fingal	40	27	13	34%
Galway City	18	12	6	33%
Galway County	39	33	6	15%
Kerry	33	27	6	18%
Kildare	40	27	13	33%
Kilkenny	24	18	6	25%
Laois	19	14	5	26%
Leitrim	18	14	4	22%
Limerick City & County	40	28	12	30%
Longford	18	16	2	11%
Louth	29	17	12	41%
Mayo	30	27	3	10%
Meath	40	25	15	38%
Monaghan	18	15	3	17%
Offaly	19	15	4	21%
Roscommon	18	15	3	17%
Sligo	18	15	3	17%
South Dublin	40	21	19	48%
Tipperary	40	28	12	30%
Waterford City & County	32	26	12	19%
Westmeath	20	17	3	15%
Wexford	34	28	6	18%
Wicklow	32	22	10	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>949</b>	<b>702</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>26%</b>

# Strengthening Local Government Structures at County and Sub-County Level

Putting People First and the 2014 Local Government Reform Act provide for a new model of municipal governance within counties. The municipal structure are based around principal towns, augmented by their hinterlands into a comprehensive system of districts. This is seen as corresponding more closely to the arrangements that apply in many European countries, with local matters decided by Councillors at district level. The municipal district arrangements go beyond the previous town council and county area committee systems, and provide for distinct powers for the elected members at municipal district level including statutorily devolved functions, comprehensive territorial coverage, absence of duplicate roles and a fully integrated operational structure.

Putting People First envisaged that “Functions of members at district level will involve a local policy/regulatory role in areas of planning, roads, traffic, housing, environmental services, recreation, amenity, community matters, civic functions, citizen and community engagement, representational and oversight functions, with district functions being consistent with county/city level policy.

**It is AILG’s contention that that the Municipal Districts have yet to fully fulfil their potential as local democratic platforms as envisaged under Putting People First.**

An independent examination of their role, structures and responsibilities should be undertaken with the objective of moving person centred services to the municipal level along with underpinning finance powers and democratic oversight.

“**Most Councillors welcome the formation of Municipal Districts (MDs) and they would like to see their MDs having more powers.**”

Recent research carried out by AILG and Maynooth University demonstrated 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.

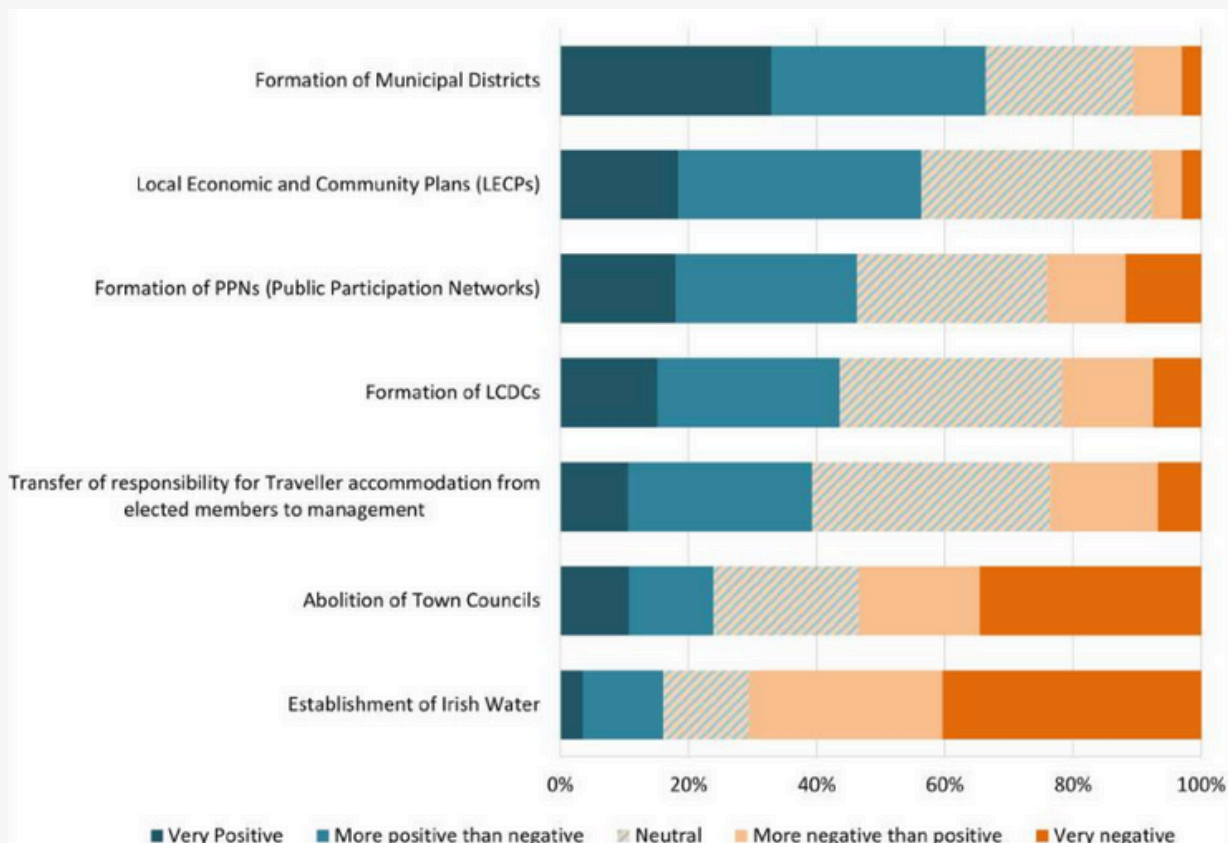
The recent reforms and reconfigurations are perceived to have increased central government’s control over local government and to have further reduced the power of the Councillor. There are also low levels of support, among Councillors, for many of the recent systemic reforms, especially the 2014 Local Government (Reform) Act. Uisce Éireann (Irish Water) and the abolition of town councils are generally perceived to have been the most problematic changes.

# Strengthening Local Government Structures at County and Sub-County Level

However, while the research findings on the recent local government reforms are generally negative, there are some positive pointers with respect to the formation of local structures, most notably Municipal Districts. Most Councillors welcome the formation of Municipal Districts (MDs) and they would like to see their MDs having more powers. Function of members at district level must involve a local policy/regulatory role in areas of planning, roads, traffic, housing, environmental services, recreation, amenity, community matters, citizen functions, citizen and community engagement and representational and oversight functions.

**There is a further need to consolidate and strengthen the electoral and decision-making functions of Municipal Districts.** A first step would be to devolve services comparable to those provided by Town Councils before the 2014 reforms to MDs. Additionally, financial and corporate independence should be considered to support increased responsibilities at the Municipal level.

If these recommendations are implemented, reintroducing Town Councils as a sub-county structure would be unnecessary.



Perceptions of Specific Reforms and Reconfigurations – Maynooth MU Research Report “*The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government*” – January 2024

# Strengthening Local Government Structures at County and Sub-County Level

In addition, extensive effort and investment on the part of our Councils has seen the implementation of Municipal district structures across rural Ireland along with area committees and ward committees in the larger more urbanised authorities. It is time that such urban based institutions i.e. area committees, be given equality and statutory status with the Municipal Districts. AILG recommends that as a matter of urgency the Area Committees in the local authorities of Cork City, Galway City and the 4 no. Dublin Local Authorities of Dublin City, Fingal, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and South Dublin be put on the same statutory footing as Municipal Districts.

## Recommendations

- Consolidate and strengthen the electoral and decision-making functions of Municipal Districts.
- Area Committees in the local authorities of Cork City, Galway City and the four Dublin Local Authorities of Dublin City, Fingal, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and South Dublin be put on the same statutory footing as Municipal Districts. It is time that these urban based institutions be given equality and statutory status with MDs.
- While Municipal Districts are considered to have improved spatial representation across the State, they have yet to fully fulfil their potential as local democratic platforms. An independent examination of their role, structures and responsibilities should be undertaken with the objective of moving person centered services to the municipal level along with the underpinning of increased financial autonomy and finance powers, greater democratic oversight and Chief Executive responsibilities.



# Enhancing Local Authority Functions and Responsibilities

As stated previously, local authorities are multi-purpose bodies responsible for delivering a broad range of important local services. They are also the main vehicle of governance and public service at local level, leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably. Local government in Ireland is big business with an estimated expenditure of €7.4 billion in 2024. The local government sector and the services it delivers play a crucial role in the economic and social life of the State. Every community and all people within those communities benefit significantly from the services provided, directly or indirectly, through local government.

The 2014 reforms did devolve new powers and responsibilities to local authorities under local economic development, local community development, governance and accountability. This included a new dedicated Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) for economic development in each local authority supported by a dedicated Director of Services for economic and community development. The reforms also provided for the establishment of one-stop shops for business support through new Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) and a closer alignment of local and community development with the local government

system. As a result, local authorities played a significant role in the economic recovery at local level following the 2008 financial and banking crisis. Aligned with this local authorities played a crucial role in leading the local response to the recent pandemic crisis with the establishment of the Community Response Forums. The role of the Community Response Forum were to provide a coordination point for the community and voluntary response in their area and enabled all those involved to work together under the stewardship of the local authority.

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**The Community Response Forums were highly effective during the pandemic crisis and more recently have led the local authority and community supports to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. The forums are an example of how adaptable our local authorities are and how they could play a leading role in social care-type service delivery.**”

More recently we have seen the establishment of Community Engagement Teams to liaise with local community's and engage directly with elected representatives, relevant Local Authorities, Local Development Companies, and other entities and individuals regarding arrivals into areas and to help equip local communities with the accurate information required to help them understand the current situation.

# Enhancing Local Authority Functions and Responsibilities

Putting People First confirmed that there would be devolution of specific functions from central government to local government and delegation of greater responsibility to local authorities with a specific commitment that *“separate structures for delivery of public services will not be established outside of local government unless clearly necessitated in exceptional circumstances.”*

**Therefore based on this evidence there is a strong argument for government to examine devolving more powers to the local authorities through the legislative process to strengthen and enhance local democracy and the delivery of additional local services.**

However, in terms of international comparisons, Ireland can be evaluated against other local democracies under several headings as follows;

**Representation:** As stated above, the decision to abolish town councils in 2014 in accordance with the Local Government Act 2014 reduced Irish local authorities from 114 to 31 compared to 600 when elections were first held in 1899. As a result, we now have one representative per 5,399 citizens, the highest among our European counterparts.

**Resources:** 8% of overall Irish public expenditure is at local authority level, compared to 23% across 23 comparable EU member states. Ireland is the most centralised state in terms of government expenditure in

another authoritative list of 39 European states, trailing after Moldova, Malta, Cyprus and Greece.

**Responsibility:** Most other European democracies play an active role in the delivery of health, housing, education, transport, policing and childcare services at a local or regional level, where they can be effectively delivered with more political accountability. Ireland’s outlier status in these and other areas reveals much about our condition that is not addressed adequately in public debate about potential reforms and political direction. Although this state is one of the richest in the world and classified among its most developed societies, current popular aspirations for better public and social services may contradict existing methods of governing and taxation to provide them.

A good example for comparison would be the Danish local government system as Denmark has a similar population to Ireland at 5.6m people. Denmark had a relatively centralised system of local government until they commenced a reform programme in 1970, with a strong push for decentralization. A subsequent second wave of reforms took place in 2007. Denmark now has a three-tier system of government, typical of most countries:

- Central Government (Ministries)
- Regional Authorities – 5 Regions – directly elected
- Local Authorities - 98 Municipalities – 2,520 directly elected councillors.

# Enhancing Local Authority Functions and Responsibilities

The Danish basic unit of local government is the Municipality – main town and its hinterland, with local councils having between 9 and 31 councillors. All local authorities will have a finance committee and other committees, responsible for specific areas (e.g. social welfare). Committees are directly responsible for preparing and implementing Council decisions. The Mayor is elected by the Council for the full term and is the full-time chief executive of the local authority administration.

At local government level in Denmark, local authorities have direct responsibility for;

- Primary and secondary schools (aged 7-16)  
Childcare
- Care of the elderly (domestic care, visiting nurses, day care centres, meals-on-wheels)
- Non-hospital healthcare (preventative treatment, health promotion, alcohol and drug abuse, dental care)
- Most Social Welfare Benefits (financed/ reimbursed by state, administered by municipalities)
- Business support services and local employment and job centres
- Social Housing
- Waste Management
- Water Supply and Treatment
- Planning and Development & Urban Renewal

- Fire Service and Civil Defence
- Public Libraries, Leisure Facilities
- Maintenance of Local Roads

In terms of finance and funding, the Danish local authorities derive their income from a number of sources including;

- Local Income Tax (usually around 20% of income – through levying taxes, local authority decides on the level of service)
- Local Property Tax
- Proportion of Corporation Tax collected in the local area
- General Purpose Grants from Central Government
- Local Charges & Local Service Charges

As evidenced from this comparison, Denmark truly encompasses the “Subsidiarity” principle, compared to Ireland, under the European Charter of Self Local Government in terms of reforms and allocation of responsibilities, where services should be provided as close to the citizen as possible.

# Enhancing Local Authority Functions and Responsibilities

## Recommendations

- Central Government to examine devolving more powers to the local authorities through the legislative process to strengthen and enhance local democracy and the delivery of additional local services.
- An independent review of the objectives of Putting People First should be undertaken to determine what has been implemented and what remains to be applied, taking into account the commitment that “separate structures for delivery of public services will not be established outside of local government unless clearly necessitated in exceptional circumstances.”
- A reform programme that would provide for greater Councillor oversight of public services beyond those within the existing mandate of local government should be examined and delivered. Local democracy has limited oversight of key local services such as local and community development, housing, water and waste water provision, childcare and primary education, primary healthcare, etc. This is a major gap in the application of local democracy and should be a minimum requirement within the Programme for Government.
- All government departments and public agencies delivering a service at local level (either directly or through a Service Level Agreement with the local authority) should be accountable to the elected council. Examples include Úisce Éireann, TII, Local Link, HSE, AHBs etc.
- All local representative groups to be accountable to the elected council either at Plenary or MD level e.g. Town Teams etc.
- Urgent review of the definition of the policy role of the elected council.
- Specific arrangements to provide access for Councillors to relevant Departments and Agencies should be put in place along with appropriate telephone access.

# Expanding Powers of the Elected Council & Local Councillors

The range of functions carried out by local authorities in Ireland is quite limited – in many other EU countries, local authorities are responsible for functions such as health, social welfare, tourism, policing, transport, education and even electricity. This in itself limits the scope and importance of local authorities in Ireland. All of the functions carried out by Irish local authorities (housing, roads, etc.) in the eight programme groups account for only between 11% - 15% of a typical Danish local authority's expenditure. An important outcome of this is the limited perceived relevance of the local government system by citizens in general, even though everyone benefits, to a greater or lesser extent, from the services provided.

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**It is often said that the introduction of the management system in Irish local government was a move towards efficiency made at the expense of democracy.** ”

If the Councillors, acting collectively, are not the true policy decision-makers, then what results is local administration rather than local government, because the will of the people may not be properly reflected in local activities/policy outcomes. This is the reality in our current local government system.

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**Putting People First stated *decisions will be made as close to the people they affect as possible. There will be greater emphasis on empowering local representatives to make decisions on behalf of the electorate. However, in AILG's view the opposite as happened. Since the 2014 reforms, the position and power of the Chief Executive has increased resulting in a growing imbalance between the executive powers of the Chief Executive and the reserved powers of the elected Councillors.***

**Accordingly, this leads to a democratic deficit where decisions can be made without direct democratic accountability.** ”

Aligned with this imbalance, over the last 10 years, local authorities have seen a number of functions, which were the responsibility of local authorities, transferred to other centralised bodies.



# Expanding Powers of the Elected Council & Local Councillors

Those functions include the following;

- Higher Education Grants Scheme, which was administered by local authorities, was replaced by the new Student Grant Scheme, administered by Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI).
- The Road Safety Authority has responsibility for driver licensing since 2013 and has established a National Driver Licence Service (NDLS).
- Irish Water (Uisce Éireann) has been established to bring the water and wastewater services of the 31 local authorities together under one national service provider. Since 2023 local authorities no longer have direct responsibility in the provision of water and waste-water service. This represents the biggest divergence of a major local government function since health was transferred from local government in the 1970's and the abolition of the Regional Health Boards in 1998.
- Responsibility for the maintenance and operation of the motorway and dual carriageway system is transferring to Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII).
- Seats occupied by Councillors on the boards of third level university institutions are being lost in October 2023 as part of wider university governance reforms – seats that Councillors have held since at least 1920.
- Proposals for Joint Policing Committees being replaced by Community Safety Partnerships with fewer Councillor representation and provision for an independent chair rather than an Elected Member.



**To add to this, Ireland has one of the most centralised systems of local government compared to our European counterparts in terms of powers, functions, service delivery and funding.**

While legal and constitutional provision has been afforded to local government under article 28A of our constitution, this provision identifies local government as being subject to law. Therefore, the national parliament and the government of the day in effect have full control over our local government system and can rearrange its structures and functions, as they see fit. This was evidenced, in the 2014 reforms with the abolition of 80 local authorities and the significant reduction in the number of Councillors by 40%.

# Expanding Powers of the Elected Council & Local Councillors

In recent times this has also been evidenced by the direct attack on Councillors' reserved powers and functions where the reserved function of Councillors approving local authority own housing developments was suspended overnight by a government amendment to the Planning and Foreshore Development Act 2022. While this was a temporary suspension until December 2024, it has now been extended to 2025. This was done without any prior notice or consultation with Councillors or their representative body.

A further example of the centralised nature of our local government system can be seen with the increasing power of the Minister through various Ministerial Guidelines now becoming mandatory, especially in relation to local authority planning policy. For example, the new draft Planning and Development Bill 2023, provides for strengthened legal status of Ministerial Guidelines. Under this bill, Ministerial Guidelines and policy directives will be upgraded to 'National Planning Policy Statements' and 'National Planning Policy Guidance' which will be mandatory. While it is recognised that local authorities must work within an overall national framework, Councillors have always been responsible in taking account of national policy when formulating local policy and this type of direct

interference eliminates the ability for local decision-making.

In addition to this, outside of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage most other government departments and agencies fail to recognise the important role of the Councillor within our local government system. In most cases, these outside government departments and agencies set the criteria for the delivery of their service by the local authority and fail to give councillors any input into their delivery. This is a further example of the lack of recognition of the important role of the local Councillor and a further dilution of elected member's powers.

# Expanding Powers of the Elected Council & Local Councillors

## Recommendations

- Immediately reverse the reserved functions/powers recently taken away from the elected council including the Section 183 function for disposal of council-owned land to the Land Development Agency for housing developments and the Part 8 reserved function for local authority own housing developments. This would demonstrate the Ministers and Government's commitment to strengthening local government and democratically elected local government.
- Review of the default provision under section 149 of the 2001 Act, which states that every function of a local authority which is not a reserved function is an executive function and therefore grants the CE power to act unless powers are specifically assigned to the elected council.
- Mandate that all government departments and public agencies recognise the important role and contribution of Councillors. This should include the establishment of CCO Officers (Council Communications Officers) in all government departments and public agencies to liaise directly with local Councillors.
- Enable Councillors to 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.

# Importance of the Elected Council's Governance and Oversight Role

Corporate governance has been defined as the system by which organisations are directed and controlled. Governance refers to the set of systems, principles and processes by which an organisation is governed. Local government in Ireland is big business. Local authorities are often the largest employer in their area. They operate in a complex environment, one that is both political and executive. They are multifunctional and interact with a wide range of stakeholders. Therefore, it is essential that a set of systems, principles and processes exist within which local government can operate. Good governance within local authorities encourages:

- Better informed decision-making.
- Accountability for the stewardship and control of resources.
- The efficient use of these resources to deliver quality public services and better outcomes for people.



**Local authorities, Elected Members, management and staff, should act in the public interest at all times. This entails respect for the rule of law, ethical behaviour and adherence to the principles of public life (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership).**

In accordance with the principles of corporate governance, local authorities are accountable for their actions and decisions and are subject to scrutiny in a number of ways including;

- The 2014 Act 2014 makes provision for the establishment of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) to scrutinise the performance of local government bodies.
- The Freedom of Information Acts (FOI), 1997 and 2003 are designed to allow public access to information which is not routinely available through other sources.
- Persons applying to local authorities for certain permissions/licences are required to give public notice of their application (e.g. planning permission, application for licence to discharge to waters).
- Local authorities are obliged to publish public notice of certain functions – intention to carry out development within their own area, compulsory purchase orders, motorway schemes, etc.
- Local authorities notify applicants of decisions on applications and their rights of appeal/review in areas such as planning.
- The accounts of local authorities are subject to audit by Local Government Audit Service

# Importance of the Elected Council's Governance and Oversight Role

- Certain department/central controls continue to be exercised such as consent to overdraft accommodation, borrowing of money, power to impose cap on % increase in commercial rates, approval of staff complements, etc.
- In areas such as national roads and the environment, local authorities are answerable to the TII and the EPA respectively.
- Documents such as the City/County Development Plan, the Annual Budget, the Annual Financial Statement, FOI Manuals, etc. are available for purchase at a nominal fee and are publically available on local authority websites.
- Individual Acts set out the rights of the public in relation to rights of inspection, rights of appeal, etc.
- Complaints may be made to the Ombudsman in relation to the activities of a local authority.
- Certain decisions may be appealed through the courts and application may be made for judicial review.
- Many of the functions of local authorities are subject to scrutiny by the European Commission or the EU Court of Auditors.
- Statutory monthly council meetings are held where the CE is required to attend and is answerable to the Elected Members.
- At statutory council meetings the Chief Executive must produce their monthly executive report to the members on the activities of the local authority and is answerable to the Elected Members on his/her report.
- The media attend council meetings and many committee meetings such as SPCs, Municipal Districts, etc.
- The public can attend statutory council meetings.
- Audit Committees have been established by City & County Councils.
- Elected members are accountable to the electorate at election time every 5 years.

As can be seen from the above, local authorities and local government is the most accountable and transparent form of government in Ireland. In addition to this, Elected Members have various powers in relation to the functions of the Chief Executive. This enables the members to play a significant part in overseeing and directing the affairs of the local authority generally.

# Importance of the Elected Council's Governance and Oversight Role

Under the Local Government Act 2001 (as amended by the 2014 Act), the Elected Members have the power to;

- Require the submission of such financial statements by the Chief Executive setting out the financial position of the local authority as they may decide. (Section 105)
- Approval of the Local Authority Corporate Plan and Annual Service Delivery Plan (Section 134)
- Report to the Elected Members on the Capital Programme (Section 135)
- Furnishing of information (by the Chief Executive) to the elected council on any business or transaction of the authority (Section 136)
- Obtain a monthly report from the chief executive, a Management Report, on the performance of executive functions, including implementation of policy and the provision of services. (Section 136)
- Require the chief executive to submit plans, specifications and cost- estimates of particular works. (Section 137)
- Require the chief executive to inform the members before performing any specified executive function (other than in respect of staff), in a particular instance or generally. (Section 138)
- Prohibit the undertaking of new works. (Section 139)
- Direct that a second legal opinion be obtained. (Section 132)
- Request a report on actions taken or planned to be taken to carry out the directions of the elected members. Following consideration of the report, the elected members may adopt a statement that the actions are not sufficient, to which the chief executive must respond within 14 days. (Section 132)
- Require that a particular act, matter or thing be done by the chief executive (Section 140).
- Inspection of the Chief Executive's (Executive) Orders by the Elected Members. (Section 151)
- Require the chief executive to attend a meeting of a local authority or a committee of a local authority. (Section 152)
- Provision for Elected Members to bring questions and motions to statutory council meetings (Schedule 10)



# Importance of the Elected Council's Governance and Oversight Role

All of the above provisions were introduced with the intention of strengthening the governance of the local authority under Putting People First and the Local Government Reform Act, 2014, the purpose of which is to address the perceived weakness of the elected side of the council vis-à-vis the executive side.

In order to further strengthen the governance of the local government sector, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage have developed a Local Government Code of Governance for the sector including local authorities. The purpose of the code is to strengthen corporate governance at local level to ensure the efficient use of resources, strengthen accountability for the stewardship of those resources and improve management

and service delivery. The leadership role of the elected council is paramount to the good governance of the local authority. The local authority, through the elected council and its members is expected to play an active leadership role within the community. This leadership role must be exercised through good corporate governance structures and principles, which further inspires trust in the local government sector and strengthens the relationships that must exist between local authorities and the communities they serve, and the wider stakeholders with whom the local authority interacts. It is imperative that the elected council effectively discharges this important governance and oversight role through the exercise of their statutory functions.

## Recommendations

- Strengthen Section 151 of the Local Government Act 2001 (as amended) in relation to Managers Orders to ensure greater oversight of the elected council in relation to the exercise of executive functions.
- Strengthen Section 126 of the Local Government Act 2001 (as amended) in relation to the work of NOAC (National Oversight and Audit Committee) to mandate them to engage with the elected council (or representatives of the elected council e.g. the CPG) when undertaking their evaluation of the performance of a local authority.
- Working in conjunction with the AILG's Elected Member Training and Education Programme, ensure that all Elected Members receive appropriate training on their governance and oversight role including the new Local Government Code of Governance.

# Local Authority Funding, Finance & Expenditure

Operations and activities of local authorities are divided into two primary accounts, the revenue account and the capital account. Local authorities revenue account covers the day-to-day activities of the Council i.e. the provision of local services, while their capital account covers the provision of infrastructure (assets). The funding streams for revenue income for local authorities come from a variety of sources, including central government, Local Government Fund, local charges for goods and services, commercial rates and Local Property Tax (LPT).

At national level, the overall total adopted local authority budgeted revenue income for 2024 is €7.225 billion which is a 10.2% increase on 2023. This €7.2 billion in budgeted income for 2024 is broken down as follows;

For 2024, the highest percentage of revenue income for local authorities came from central government funding at 45%, with income from commercial rates at 25%. Income from local goods and services will amount to 22%, with LPT accounting for 7% of current income for local authorities. Therefore, 55% of all local authority income is generated at local level from commercial rates, income from goods and services and the LPT, helping to fulfil the vision set out in 'Putting People First' for local government to be the primary means of public service at local level and restored a degree of fiscal autonomy to Elected Members and local councils. This also reflects the constitutional and independent nature of our local government system.

**Table 1 - Sources and Relative Percentages of Budgeted Current Income 2022 - 2024**

	2022 Budget		2023 Budget		2024 Budget	
	€'m	% of Income	€'m	% of Income	€'m	% of Income
<b>Government Grants/ Subsidies</b>	2,454	40%	2,764	42%	3,269	45%
<b>Goods / Services</b>	1,537	25%	1,598	24%	1,614	22%
<b>Commercial Rates</b>	1,713	28%	1,768	27%	1,838	25%
<b>Local Property Tax</b>	415	7%	426	6.5%	504	7%

Source <https://assets.gov.ie/localauthoritybudgets2024>

# Local Authority Funding, Finance & Expenditure

The Local Property Tax (LPT), introduced in 2014, is a self-assessed tax charged on residential properties in the state with the ability for Councillors to vary the charge by +/- 15%. LPT helps fund essential local services of local authorities such as public parks; libraries; open spaces and leisure amenities; planning and development; fire and emergency services; maintenance and cleaning of streets and street lighting – all benefitting citizens directly. This local funding is the primary means of delivering public service at local level and restoring a degree of fiscal autonomy to Councillors and local councils.

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**LPT helps fund essential local services of local, benefitting all citizens directly. This local funding is the primary means of delivering public service at local level and restoring a degree of fiscal autonomy to Councillors and local councils.**”

In 2023, changes were made in relation to how LPT was allocated and distributed to local authorities with local authorities now retaining 100% of the LPT collected in their local authority area. Most local authorities received a

substantial increase in their baseline allocation from their LPT allocation for general purpose spending. However, for 2024, 10 of our local authorities have a surplus LPT, above their baseline figure, with some of this surplus required to self-finance funding for housing and roads services. AILG would contend that 100% of LPT collected in a local authority area should be allocated back to the relevant authority for general purpose spending and any allocations for self-funding of housing and roads services should be made from other central government funds.

## Recommendations

- A review of the overall position of local government finance needs to be undertaken having regard to the need for a sustainable financial environment. This should include examining additional local revenue raising powers for the Elected Members. Therefore it is recommended that a multi sector task force with international input be commissioned to undertake this review.
- 100% of Local Property Tax collected in a local authority area should be allocated back to the relevant authority for general purpose spending for the provision of local services.

# Representation and Number of Councillors

In 2012, the then Government launched a comprehensive Action Programme for Effective Local Government - “Putting People First” (PPF). This action plan has brought about fundamental changes to the local government system in Ireland, covering four main areas including structures, funding and accountability & governance, economic development (including job creation) and delivering services efficiently.

Structural changes provided for in the action plan and subsequently legislated for in the Local Government Reform Act 2014, provided for the merger of some county/city authorities into one local authority (North & South Tipperary, Limerick City/County & Waterford City/County). This, along with the abolition of the 80 Town/Borough Councils, has resulted in a reduction in the number of local authorities from 114 to 31 and within those 31 local authorities the establishment 95 Municipal Districts, Borough Districts and Metropolitan Districts, representing 166 Local Electoral Area’s. These changes led to a reduction in the number of councillors throughout the State from 1,627 to 949. This reduction represents a 42% decrease in overall numbers (over 33% reduction in real terms due to some elected members holding both town and county seats).

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**Ireland now has fewer Councillors per capita than any other EU country and other democracies examined. ”**

There are 949 elected councillors in Ireland for a population of 5.1 million. Compared to similar if slightly larger European countries. Denmark, with a population of 5.9m has 2,432 while Finland, with a population of 5.6m has 8,859 Councillors.

Country	Municipalities/ Local Authorities	Number of Councillors	Population	Head of Population for Each Councillor
Ireland	31	949	5,123,536	5,399
Portugal	308	2,064	10,136,251	4,911
Scotland	32	1,227	5,463,300	4,453
Northern Ireland	11	462	1,903,100	4,119
Greece	332	2,988	10,319,535	3,454
Switzerland	2,172	2,548	8,783,205	3,447
United Kingdom	398	22,943	67,326,569	2,934
England	333	20,000	56,489,800	2,824
Latvia	43	664	1,843,756	2,777
Wales	22	1,254	3,267,501	2,606
Denmark	98	2,432	5,833,692	2,399
Belgium	581	5,370	11,692,086	2,177
Netherlands	344	8,600	17,717,600	2,060
Poland	2,478	39,549	37,762,312	955
Germany	2,627	91,945	84,328,144	917
Spain	8,112	66,000	46,791,659	709
Finland	310	8,859	5,558,227	627
Sweden	290	19,140	10,416,585	544
Italy	8,000	120,000	60,280,780	502
Luxembourg	106	1,484	632,275	426
Slovenia	212	5,512	2,079,520	377
Croatia	555	14,430	4,053,795	281
France	36,500	255,500	65,567,292	257
Austria	2,098	60,741	9,111,075	150

# Representation and Number of Councillors

However, our local government system is a prime example of democracy. Outside of the Oireachtas, local authorities are the only bodies whose members are elected by direct vote of the electorate. They are also the only form of government in which everyone can participate irrespective of citizenship. Councillors are elected by local people to make local decisions, to articulate local views and to identify and meet local requirements. A key element of local government is that councillors act in the interests of the people being served, seeking to meet their needs and give them the best possible quality of life.

At the 2024 local elections, the national turnout for the elections was 49.4%, which was down slightly from the 50.2% turnout at the 2019 local elections. In the 20-year period since 2004 we have seen a continuous drop in turnout of -9.24% from 58.64% in 2004 to 49.04% in 2024. The 2024 local elections marked a record low in terms of voter turnout levels at local election contests. Is the first time in the history of the State that more than half of the registered voters failed to turn out to vote in a local election contest. 247 female Councillors were elected representing 26% of the total number of Councillors. This is up 22 (10%) from 225 elected in the 2019 local elections.

However, it is level with the number of outgoing Councillors in June 2024 when there were 247 outgoing women Councillors. Donegal has the lowest percentage of women Councillors with 3 women Councillors out of 37 (8%) while South Dublin County Council has the highest percentage of female Councillors with 19 women Councillors out of 40 (48%). 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. Organisations such as “Women for Election” and See Her Elected (SHE) have been working in the area of promoting women’s interest in local government and to encourage more women to stand for election to public office.

## Recommendation

- Electoral Commission to carry out an immediate review of voter participation post the 2024 local elections to include public awareness of misinformation, disinformation and manipulative behavior during the local election period. Need to establish educational and information programmes to help address these issues.



# Representation and Number of Councillors

## Number of Councillors

As stated previously, Ireland has fewer Councillors per capita than any other EU country and other democracies examined. There are 949 elected Councillors in Ireland for a population of 5.149 million (Census 2022). This represents a ratio of 1 Councillor per 5,426 per head of population.

Comparisons to similar if slightly larger European countries show that Denmark, with a population of 5.9m has 2,432 while Finland, with a population of 5.6m has 8,859 Councillors. Ireland also lags behind our UK counterparts when it comes to Councillors per capita. Scotland with a population of 5.463 million has 1,227 Councillors (ratio of 1:4, 453 per head of population), Wales has 1,254 Councillors for a population of 3.267 million (ratio of 1:2, 606 per head of population) while England, with a population of 56.489 million, has 20,000 Councillors. (Ratio of 1:2, 824 per head of population).

As stated above, currently Ireland has 949 Councillors for a population of 5,149,139 (Census 2022) resulting in a ratio of one Councillor for every 5,426 citizens. In 2014, Under Putting People First, the then government legislated that there would be 949 Councillors covering 137 local electoral areas. With a 2011 Census population of 4,588,252 this resulted in a ratio of one Councillor for

every 4,835 per head of population. In 2018, a further local boundary review was commissioned by the Minister with a recommendation to increase the number of electoral areas from 137 to 166. However, the number of Councillors remained at 949. This remained in place for the recent local elections.

In order to address the high ratio of Councillor to head of population the following must be taken into account;

- While it may be desirable to increase the number of Councillors at local electoral area to address our high Councillor per capita ratio, it must be recognised that this will also result in an increase in the overall number of Councillors sitting at plenary level (i.e. city/council level) which may pose some challenges.
- While the current level of membership in councils is well behind European averages, any move in expansion in membership does however need to be reasonable and be cognisant of the need to expand the responsibilities of elected members in the first instance.
- A scheme that provides for a sustainable level of Councillor representation, given population growth, needs to be examined.

# Representation and Number of Councillors

## Number of Councillors

Therefore, in order to address this issue AILG proposes that a proportional allocation of council membership in line with the Councillor to electorate ratios applied under Putting People First should be considered and applied as part of an overall reconfiguration of local electoral areas prior to the next local government elections in 2029. This would mean that based on the 2022 Census of 5,149,139 the number of Councillors would need to increase to 1,065 (excluding the Limerick Directly Mayor) to achieve a Councillor per head of population ratio of 1:4, 835. This would result in an increase in Councillors of 116 or 12%. AILG believes that this would be a moderate and sustainable increase in Councillor representation given population growth.

A full breakdown of our proposal for increasing the number of Councillors in line with population increases and a sample criteria for the allocation of these additional Councillors is detailed in Appendix 1.

## Recommendations

- The current level of membership in councils is well behind European averages. Any move to expansion in membership does however need to be reasonable and be cognisant of the need to expand the responsibilities of elected members in the first instance.
- A scheme that provides for a sustainable level of councillor representation, given population growth, needs to be examined. Ideally, consideration of proportional allocation of council membership in line with the Councillor to electorate ratios applied under Putting People First should be considered and applied as part of an overall reconfiguration of local electoral areas prior to the next local government elections in 2029.

# Councillor Supports - Pay and Non-Pay Supports

One of the most important and recent improvements in our local government system has been the significant improvement in Councillors' remuneration and supports over the last number of years.

Following the independent Moorhead Review of the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members, recognition was given that "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." In 2021 major changes were made to Councillor's remuneration and allowances as follows;

- Substantial increase in Councillors' salary and linked to the local authority pay scale. The current salary is €29,888 (gross) per annum as of 1st June 2024.
- Non-Taxable Travel & Subsistence Allowance
- Vouched Local Representation Allowance of €5,160 maximum per annum

The above is in addition to various Mayor/Cathaoirleach and committee chair allowances payable. The Moorhead report also identified several important non-pay supports that should be progressed in consultation with

key stakeholders. A number of working groups have been established by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, with representation by Councillors representative bodies including ALLG to progress these non-pay supports in the areas of;

- 1) Defining the role of the Councillor
- 2) The running of Council meetings
- 3) Training and support requirements for elected representatives
- 4) Administration support requirements
- 5) Technological solutions
- 6) Future Councillors/gender and diversity balance

**Maternity Leave for Councillors:** In 2022, for the first time an entitlement of maternity leave has been afforded to Local Authority Elected Councillors equivalent to the current entitlement for employees in general society. This provision has also provided for the innovative proposal of the appointment by co-option of an individual as a temporary substitute for a Councillor that takes maternity leave or is absent due to illness or in good faith for another reason. In parallel, as part of a wider package of maternity-related supports for Councillors, an allowance for secretarial/administrative support has been introduced for Councillors who are availing of maternity leave. The absence of formal

# Councillor Supports - Pay and Non-Pay Supports

maternity leave and equally importantly maternity supports to complement such leave were a major barrier to the participation of women in local government. This Act addresses these obstacles, in an inclusive and supportive manner. It is envisaged that this will help to ensure that current and future Councillors will be more fully representative of the constituents they serve, but also that the role of the Councillor is accessible, sustainable and ensures that Councillors are more fully representative of the constituents they serve.

In order to ensure increased participation at local government level and to ensure a greater diversity of Councillor, the Maynooth MU Research Report identified strong support for

continued enhancement of remuneration and pay supports, family-friendly practices and additional non-pay supports. In line with this AILG would recommend the following;

- Councillor's allowances such as the various Cathaoirleach/Committee Chair allowances should be index linked on an on-going basis. These allowances have remained static since they were first introduced.
- Additional family-friendly measures to enable a greater diversity and gender participation at local government level.
- Implementation of the remaining Moorhead Non-Pay supports as recommended in the Moorhead Report.

## Recommendations

- Councillor's allowances such as the various Cathaoirleach/Committee Chair allowances should be index linked on an on-going basis. These allowances have remained static since they were first introduced.
- Additional family-friendly measures to enable a greater diversity and gender participation at local government level.
- Implementation of the remaining Moorhead Non-Pay supports as recommended in her report on the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members.
- Employers should be required to allow for Councillor attendance at meetings and training required for Councillor purposes.

# Training and Education for Councillors

Local authorities are multi-purpose bodies responsible for delivering a broad range of important local services. Local authorities are also the main vehicle of governance and public service delivery at local level, leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably. Our elected Councillors are the public face of our local authorities. The elected council is in law the policy-making arm of the local authority with councillors having the role of creating the overall policy framework which dictate the overall direction and functioning of the local authority that the Council's executive and staff work within. Councillors are working in a complex environment, making policy decisions across a wide range of functions that effect the quality of life and local service delivery to the public. Therefore, it is imperative that Councillors have access to appropriate training and education to enhance their knowledge across all functional areas of local authority delivery.

One of AILG's key objectives is to deliver relevant, high-quality training to Ireland's local authority elected members, equipping them to fulfill their governance duties now and in the future. Through the "AILG Elected Members Training Programme," the Association provides comprehensive training across a range of local

authority functions, ensuring Councillors are well-prepared to meet their governance responsibilities effectively. Over the past decade, our programme has continually expanded, offering tailored training and education to all 949 elected Councillors. In 2023, AILG delivered the following training;

- 2,653 attendees attended over 26 Training events (including over 850 online attendees.)
- 600 attendees attended our two national Annual Training Conference & Autumn Seminar events.
- The number of councillors who have attended at least one of our online training sessions now stands at 671 elected members or above 70% of our membership.
- 11 online training webinars were delivered to our Members between Sept 2022 - September 2023.
- 18 councillors successfully graduated from the AILG sponsored UCC Level 7 Certificate in Climate Action and Local Government in 2023. This followed 24 councillors who completed the course in 2022.

The training modules focus on topics relevant to local authority functions, elected members' reserved duties, & their representational role. Our programme is delivered through a blended approach, combining in-person and online learning.

# Training and Education for Councillors

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**It is imperative that our Elected Members have the necessary knowledge, education and leadership expertise to help them to meet their legislated responsibilities and to continue to strengthen and improve our local government system. ”**

Our recent research findings, by Maynooth University, in respect of tools and skills revealed that while there is a clear recognition of the importance of training and up-skilling, almost half of Councillors have not availed of continuous 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 AILG 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. Given the full-time nature of the role and their other commitments, Councillors face challenges in accessing and availing of training opportunities. However, Councillors recognise the importance

of, and growing need for, training and continuous professional development. 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.

In addition to the growing need for, training and continuous professional development, there is also a need for Councillors to have access to independent technical and legal advice, as appropriate, to fulfil their statutory duties within the council chamber.

## Recommendation

- Support and Resource AILG’s Training and Education Programme to respond to councillors’ growing recognition of the importance of, and growing need for, training and continuous professional development (CPD).



# Housing and Homelessness – ‘Building Homes...Building Hope’

As the country continues to face one of the biggest housing and homelessness crisis in its history, AILG continues to support all efforts to-date in trying to address the current crisis. All of our local public representatives are working with people in housing and homelessness difficulties on a daily basis to help them access appropriate social and affordable housing. Housing related issues are a central concern in our members work as public representatives and AILG can safely state that no other local government issue generates so much of a Councillor’s workload as is the case with housing. This manifesto outlines the key priorities and recommendations that we believe need to be implemented in both the immediate & longer term in order to address the housing and homelessness crisis facing the country.

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**AILG’s key principal, that our manifesto is based on, is that the role of the local authority, as the housing authority in each city and county and as lead providers of social housing throughout Ireland, must be reinforced in order to fully address the current crisis. ”**

However, we do of course not disregard the role and contribution of other social and affordable housing providers. For more than a century, local authorities have successfully been the providers of social housing for the Irish population.

Our local authorities have a strong record of achievement in the housing area. Many independent commentators have reiterated that local authorities should be the primary provider of social housing in the country. In the context of any housing policy, the experience and the capacity of the local authority as the housing authority needs to be underpinned and emphasised.

In this regard, AILG welcomes the recently published Housing Commission report which recommends legally underpinning their proposed reforms with a new Social Housing Act that would specify and protect the social purpose of the social housing sector over the long term and ensure that the sector is not privatized. AILG also welcomes the recommendation in the report to increase the proportion of social and cost-rental housing to meet current needs. The proportion of this housing should be 20% of the national stock and ensure “an appropriate tenure mix”. This would ensure that social housing “will provide a substantial source of rented housing for lower and middle-income households in future”. The Commission report also recommends that increased social housing should be supported with a “long term commitment to stable public funding as well funding from private sources”. These reform proposals are welcomed and should be incorporated immediately into the Governments “Housing for All” action plan.

### Projected Housing Output (New Build) 2022 - 2030

Tenure	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
<b>Social Homes</b>	9,000	9,100	9,300	10,000	10,200	10,200	10,200	10,200	10,200
<b>Affordable &amp; Cost Rental Homes</b>	4,100	5,500	6,400	6,400	6,100	6,300	6,400	6,300	6,300
<b>Private Rental &amp; Private Ownership Homes</b>	11,500	14,400	17,750	18,200	19,800	20,400	21,500	23,000	24,000
<b>Total Homes</b>	24,600	29,000	33,450	34,600	36,100	36,900	38,100	39,500	40,500

'Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland' is the government's housing policy to 2030. It is a multi-annual, multi-billion euro plan, which aims to improve Ireland's housing system and deliver more homes of all types for people with different housing needs. Under Housing for All, social housing delivery is supported through a number of funding streams and is delivered via local authorities and approved housing bodies. The statistical tables below provide details on the number of social homes delivered across the various delivery streams and funding programmes. The following section provides details on Social Housing delivery across the Build, Acquisition, Leasing, HAP and RAS delivery streams.



# Housing and Homelessness – ‘Building Homes...Building Hope’

Housing for All, aims to provide over 40,000 new homes per annum by 2030, including over 10,000 social homes and 6,300 affordable homes per annum. In 2023, there was a 16% increase in social housing delivery, with 11,939 social homes delivered and over 4,000 affordable homes delivered which was a 128% increase on 2022. Of the 11,939 new social homes, these were delivered by local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies (AHB) and include 8,110 new-build homes, 1,830 acquisitions and 1,999 homes through leasing programmes. This is an increase of 16.33% on 2022 when 10,263 social homes were delivered. When the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) of 8,292 units and Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) of 1,542 units are added, 21,773 social housing supports were delivered in 2023.

However, as you can see from the figures above, nearly half of the overall social housing delivery is through the private rental market through the HAP & RAS schemes. During the course of the 15 years, and under various governments, national policy has been over-reliant on the private housing market to deliver social housing units. We believe that now is the time for this trend to be reversed.



**AILG believes that a greater emphasis must be placed on a more ambitious, nation-wide local authority house building programme to include both acquisitions and a new build programme.** ”

In this regard we support the Housing Commission’s recommendation to increase the size of the social and cost-rental housing sectors to 20% of the national housing stock so that these sectors will provide a substantial source of rented housing for lower and middle-income households in future.

With population growth figures set to continue to rise, thus enforcing a high demand for housing, this will inevitably lead to both social housing and private housing clients competing for the same limited supply of units in the absence of a significant increase in the building of social housing units. While we believe that local authorities, in their role as housing authorities, have an important function in facilitating housing provision and development in conjunction with the private sector and the approved housing bodies it is imperative that local government be allowed the freedom to substantially enhance its own capacity to directly deliver housing units.

# Housing and Homelessness – ‘Building Homes...Building Hope’

The Summary of Social Housing Assessments for 2023 confirms that the total number of qualified households in need of social housing is 58,824, an increase from 57,842 in 2022. In order to ensure that local government be allowed the freedom to substantially enhance its own capacity to directly deliver housing units, AILG calls on the Government, to increase its delivery target of social housing units to 2030 and commit to investing in delivering 15,000 local authority social housing units per annum for the period 2025 – 2030 in order to fully address the 59,000 households currently on local authority housing lists.

As stated previously, local authorities have a strong record of achievement in the housing area and are always conscious of the need to create sustainable, integrated communities with accessibility to schools, community facilities, retail centres and employment. A long-term national local authority house building programme will ensure that these sustainable communities will continue into the future. In that regard, we support the commitment contained in Housing for All for mixed tenure developments. However, we would propose that the department reconsiders its policy of not sanctioning larger local authority developments unless they are part of a mixed tenure development. This we feel is particularly relevant in the greater Dublin area where

flexibility on this policy is needed, to ensure that targets set out in the action plan, in terms of social housing delivery are met.

However, the association would also advocate that in order to sustain a more targeted local authority capital build programme to 2030, local authorities must develop and enhance their estate managements and social supports programmes to their tenants to ensure that the past social legacy problems are not repeated. Local authorities must provide excellence in estate management of their tenants, where the services people need are available, where the neighbourhood is safe and free from anti-social behaviour and where residents feel a sense of belonging and want to stay. Local authorities need to develop an excellence in estate and housing services which is critical to the long-term sustainability of both the communities and the properties. In order for this to happen, local authorities must be provided with financial resources to invest in direct estate maintenance and social care workers to provide the proper care services to their tenants.

To deliver on these more ambitious social housing targets, there is also a need to streamline approval procedures for social housing projects in order to fast track these projects for quicker delivery. The current process for a turnkey social housing project needs to be

# Housing and Homelessness – ‘Building Homes...Building Hope’

further fast tracked in order to eliminate unnecessary delays in giving projects the necessary go-ahead to proceed. Currently the length of time that it takes to deliver a social housing project is unacceptable and needs urgent reform even after moving from the previous 9-stage to a 4-stage approval process. While AILG accepts that proper procurement procedures and good governance need to be adhered to at all times the issue of each stage of the process needing approval at central level before the next stage can commence, we believe is leading to lengthy delays in housing projects and is an issue that needs urgent action. This is also a recommendation in the Housing Commission report where they recommend a review and streamline the arrangements for approving central capital grants and other public subsidies for social and affordable housing provision by the DHLGH to speed up the approval and payment processes.

Another issue leading to unacceptable delays in the approval process of schemes is that due to the previous moratorium on recruitment in the public sector, local authorities have lost invaluable technical staff over the last 15-20 years and the loss of such experience is also leading to delays in progressing some social housing projects. While acknowledging that this moratorium was lifted in 2015, local authorities

are still experiencing difficulty in recruiting the appropriate technical staff needed to progress some social housing projects because of lack of necessary funds. We would propose that funding for appropriate technical staff would be included in the capital costs of housing projects to ensure that no housing projects are delayed due to a lack of technical expertise. Short term contracts to recruit appropriate technical staff should be afforded on specific social housing projects if necessary to ensure that these projects are commenced and delivered without delays.

We would also propose that the shared services model currently operating successfully in the Irish local government environment should be employed to rapidly scale-up the input of specialist housing personnel. Design and planning teams could be assembled in a number of core local authorities with their services available across county boundaries to other local authorities. These shared services teams could then work in conjunction with the Housing for All Delivery Unit within the department. This approach of a shared services model was used to good effect in the early years of the national motorway programme where a design team was assembled in a given county and its expertise deployed to other counties so as to create a flexible and rapid response to the need for expertise in an accelerated building programme.

# Housing and Homelessness – ‘Building Homes...Building Hope’

**Finally, one issue that AILG has continuously identified that can help with the immediate housing need is tackling the issue of vacant local authority housing units or voids.** AILG welcomes that over 2,481 voids were brought back into use in 2023. However, there is a need to continually address the historic and unacceptable re-letting times of up to 35 weeks in some instances of bring voids back into use.

The 2022 Local Authority Performance Indicator Report by the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC), concluded that the average re-letting time for a vacant local authority unit for 2022 was 35.22 weeks, an increase on 34.44 weeks in 2021 and 32.69 weeks in 2020. The average letting cost was €21,886.04, compared to €19,653.39 in 2021 and €19,065.30 in 2020. While the AILG accepts that significant improvement has been made by local authorities in improving re-letting times of vacant properties, a continuous review their performance in this area is required on an ongoing basis to ensure a timely turn-around of vacant units to meet the significant demand that exists for social housing.

AILG recommend that local authorities would have a dedicated ring-fenced rolling budget on an annual basis for pre-letting repairs costs. This rolling budget from central funds could be dependent on matching funding from the local authority's own resources, which would help with the timely re-letting of vacant housing units. This would also give greater autonomy to each local authority to prioritise what level of repairs are required to bring their vacant units to re-letting standards taking their immediate housing needs into account.



# Housing and Homelessness – ‘Building Homes...Building Hope’

## Recommendations

- Role of the local authority, as the housing authority in each city and county and as lead providers of social housing throughout Ireland, must be reinforced in order to fully address the housing current crisis.
- Greater emphasis must be placed on a more ambitious, nation-wide local authority house building programme to include both acquisitions and a new build programme and the delivery target of social housing units to 15,000 local authority/AHB social housing units per annum for the period 2025 – 2030.
- Local authorities must be provided with financial resources to invest in direct estate maintenance and social care workers to provide the proper care services to their tenants.
- Local authorities to have a dedicated ring-fenced rolling budget on an annual basis for pre-letting repairs costs.
- Need to further streamline approval procedures for social housing projects in order to fast track these projects for quicker delivery including;
  - Funding for appropriate technical staff to be included in the capital costs of housing projects to ensure that no housing projects are delayed due to a lack of technical expertise.
  - Propose that the shared services model currently operating successfully in the Irish local government environment should be employed to rapidly scale-up the input of specialist housing personnel with local authorities across various regions.
- The immediate conferring of the reserved function to approve a local authority differential rents scheme under section 31 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.

# Climate Action

Climate change is the defining issue of our time with all sections of society aware that we must deal with the reality of climate change. Society and the economy need to act now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and thus avoid the worst impacts of climate change. The local government sector is no different.

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**Local authorities have long been at the frontline in dealing with extreme weather events and as these extremes become more frequent, local authorities must ensure local adaptation to a changed climate.** ”

The “All of Government Climate Action Plan” is a measure of how involved councils will be in addressing the climate challenge. The current Programme for Government commits to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030, a 51% reduction over a decade and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. The 2050 target has been set in law by The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act, 2021 with every sector contributing to meeting this target.

In order to ensure that the local government sector plays its part in achieving the 51%

reduction in gas emissions within this decade it is essential that we build the capacity of local authorities to lead locally and engage citizens and communities on climate change and biodiversity. Local authorities are key decision makers regarding choices relating to energy use, buildings, transport, waste management, green infrastructure and the many other initiatives that can help reduce our emissions. The sector has already commenced this work in leading the local challenge to climate change with the establishment of the Regional Climate Action Offices (CARO) in 2018 who have driven climate action responses at local level including building capacity, awareness and training with both local authority staff and elected members.

The CARO offices have developed a comprehensive Local Authority Climate Action Training programme for all local authority staff and in conjunction with AILG for our 949 elected members. This training has been rolled out over the past 3 years with tailored training for councillors and senior local authority staff in championing leadership to harness that local leadership role of councillors in driving effective climate action. A further training plan is being developed for the period 2024 – 2027.

All local authorities including all Cathaoirígh and Mayors have co-signed the Climate Action Charter for local authorities and they have been formally adopted in each individual council.

# Climate Action

The Climate Action Charter commits local authorities to several actions that will ensure that they play a key leadership role locally and nationally in delivering effective climate action including:

- Putting in place a process for carbon proofing major decisions, programmes and projects on a systematic basis, including investments in transport and energy infrastructure.
- Deliver a 50% improvement in energy efficiency by 2030.
- Ensure all suppliers provide information on their carbon footprint and steps they plan to reduce its impact.
- Build local citizen engagement, particularly with young people.
- Partner & collaborate on climate action initiatives with local community groups, local enterprise and local schools and higher level institutions. Local authorities have also prepared and published their Local Authority Climate Action Plans.

Further initiatives for the local authorities will include leading the energy transition by retrofitting their social housing stock as part of the government's commitment to retrofitting over 500,000 homes by 2030 as part of the EU Renovation Wave. Another initiative focuses on reducing dependence on high-carbon transport systems by providing safe cycling and walking

infrastructure. It also ensures that local development plans promote economic activity in areas previously expecting growth from fossil fuel infrastructure. Additionally, there is a commitment to leave no sector of society or community behind in the transition.

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**AILG are committed to ensuring that our elected members have the required training, knowledge and tools to lead and champion the local response to climate change.**”

AILG have had extensive engagement over the last number of years with the Departments, National Emergency Management Directorate and Met Éireann who have provided briefings to Councillors on the local authority response to severe weather events and mitigation of severe climate events. As well as working with the CARO offices on the roll-out of their training programme, AILG have also delivered a comprehensive training programme with the Office of the Planning Regulator and Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. The training focused on the development plan review process, covering areas such as decarbonisation, the implementation of national climate policy, and the adoption of new energy sources and active travel. It also highlighted innovative practices in development planning and local authority

# Climate Action

initiatives to promote public transport, walking, and cycling. AILG has recently delivered a training module for our members on local government and the sustainable development goals. It is important that our members and local authorities embed the SDGs in their County and City Development Plans, Corporate Plans, Local Area Plans and Local Economic and Community Plans. Our members must also ensure that the SDGs are integral to Council policy development across all departments. AILG has also engaged extensively and participated on the advisory body on the Marine Planning and Development Bill and also currently participates on the advisory body on the new National Waste and Circular Economy Action Plan.

However as local authorities rise to the challenge of leading the local response to climate change they also face a number of challenges particularly around resources. Over the last 10-15 years, local authorities have seen a reduction on staff numbers and if the targets on climate action set by the government are to be delivered at local government level, local authorities will need much needed additional resources. AILG welcomes the commitment in the programme for government that every local authority will have a sufficient number of biodiversity and heritage officers among their staff complement. However, additional staff resources will be needed to engage with

communities and the public in local initiatives to meet climate targets. Additional support is essential for local governments to uphold the “Just Transition” philosophy, ensuring no community or sector is left behind in the shift to a low-carbon future. In recent years, local authorities have successfully led economic recovery efforts after the recession and spearheaded the local Covid-19 response, including the Community Call programme. They are well-positioned to lead the local response to the climate challenge.

## Recommendations

- Need to commit to ensuring that our elected members continue to have the required training, knowledge and tools to lead and champion the local response to climate change.
- Local authorities must embed the SDGs in their County and City Development Plans, Corporate Plans, Local Area Plans and Local Economic and Community Plans. Local Authorities must ensure that the SDGs are integral to Council policy development across all departments.
- Additional staff resources must be provided to local authorities to work with communities and the public on local initiatives to achieve our climate targets.

# Continued Growth of AILG – The National Representative Body for Councillors

The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) is the primary national body representing the 949 democratically elected local authority members across Ireland and our 31 local authority member councils.



**As a representative body, AILG plays a key role in shaping policy, delivering training and education for elected members, and promoting public awareness of the essential contributions made by local Councillors and their governing local authorities.**

Our goal is to represent the collective interests of our elected Councillors, promote democratic leadership and ensuring local government supports the well-being of communities and ensures effective governance.

AILG's statutory remit includes:

- Carrying out activities necessary to represent the interests of our members and our member local authorities.
- Policy research, development and advocacy.
- Delivery of education and training.
- Assessment of public policy as regards any matter relating to local government.
- The provision of advice & making submissions to the Minister, department(s) or other state agencies on areas of local government or other public policy areas as appropriate.

AILG closely monitors output from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, as well as other agencies, to identify proposals that affect Councillor's powers. Guided by the Programme for Government and legislative priorities, it gathers feedback from Councillors through committees, training sessions, and ongoing engagement. The AILG also reviews draft legislation to assess its impact on elected members and local government.

The Association has played a significant role in recent years in improving supports for the individual Councillor and the Councillors collectively as well as a much enhanced role in the development of policy at national level, particularly in regard to terms and conditions, thematic policy developments and revisions to the overall policy framework applied to the delivery of local government services, citizen based actions and improved local participation of communities and interest groups at local level. In light of the above the Association has produced an extensive range of policy and practice papers, supporting the role of the Councillor as well as underlining the role of the local government sector across local to national policy levels. Consequently the Association generally is exceptionally placed to input its thinking into a future perspective on the role of the elected member and on the overall role of local government in the delivery of local and national services as well as playing

# Continued Growth of AILG – The National Representative Body for Councillors

the key role in sustaining local democracy.

In conjunction to this, the Association delivers a substantial education and training remit to their members. One of our core responsibilities is to equip our members with relevant training to effectively govern their local authorities. For over a decade our Elected Member Training Programme has tailored in-person and on-line training annually. The programme is delivered in conjunction with the DHLGH featuring speakers from various government bodies and national agencies.

However, the AILG is relatively under-resourced and understaffed. This requires attention to strengthen its capacity for delivering continuous professional development, education for members, and policy papers increasingly requested by both national and local governments. Additionally, there is a growing need for enhanced support services to help members manage rising pressures and wellbeing issues, which, if left unaddressed, could lead to isolation and mental health challenges.

There is an immediate need to ensure sufficient resourcing of AILG in order to increase its staff compliment in appropriate areas of expertise to ensure the continued professional service delivery to the full body of 949 elected members.

## Recommendations

- AILG currently faces limitations in resources and staffing. This needs to be addressed to strengthen its ability to deliver continuous professional development and education for members, produce the policy papers increasingly requested by national and local governments, and expand support services for members as they face growing pressures in their roles.
- Investigate the potential for the establishment of a panel of independent advisors / points of reference (via AILG) for Councillors to enable effective engagement with the more technical aspects of their role.
- Arrangements should be put in place to allow the Association Executive to have regular engagement with Government Ministers and Ministers of State and, in light of the expanding role of local government, with relevant Secretaries General and key State bodies responsible for the delivery of person centred services.

# Supporting Gender and Diversity in Local Government

The AILG is committed to developing initiatives that support Gender & Diversity in Local Government, and a key goal of the Association is to help and support existing Councillors to ensure that we retain members from diverse and minority groups and in particular women once they are elected.

As part of a broader programme focussing on gender balance and diversity at local government level, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) has brought forward a number of funding streams over the last number of years aimed at supporting activities to increase the number of female and diverse candidates running in the Local Elections in 2024.

In June 2021, following a funding approval from the DHLGH, the AILG in partnership with See Her Elected (SHE) established a WoMeN's Regional Caucus pilot for the Western, Midlands and Northern region of the country, in order to help retain & support women in politics. The Caucus encompasses 13 local authorities; Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Galway County, Galway City, Roscommon, Cavan, Monaghan, Longford, Westmeath, Laois and Offaly. Each participating County Council was chosen due to the fact that these neighbouring Councils accounted for some of the lowest numbers of female elected representatives across the State.

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**The purpose of the Regional Caucus is to support and retain the currently elected female Councillors within our local government system, encourage the participation of women in local government in general and to increase the participation of women in the 2024 Local Elections and beyond.** ”

The AILG and SHE currently provide joint secretariat to the WoMeN's Regional Caucus from their own resources. Over the past two years, the Caucus membership have actioned an ambitious programme of work with the support of the Secretariat which include; successfully coordinating flagship events on International Women's Day to raise awareness of role and work of women in local politics, commencing a safety walking audit across the participating counties, advancing policy at the intersection of housing and domestic violence in collaboration with Safe Ireland, an outreach programme to TY Students to highlight the issue of gender and diversity in local politics, an online webinar series aimed at supporting and enabling women to get involved, and stay in politics, and the delivery of training on a range of issues as identified by the membership.



# Supporting Gender and Diversity in Local Government

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**As a national representative body for councillors across Ireland, one of AILG's priorities is to support and retain the women councillors that are currently elected & to promote better gender equality & diversity in our local government system. ”**

The success of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus was highlighted internationally last year when it was nominated as a finalist for the prestigious democracy prize at the European awards which celebrated 90 finalists from over 400 European entries. The Caucus beat off stiff competition to be selected as one of the 10 finalists in the democracy category. The Chair and Vice Chair of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus engaged in a number of workshops in Poland in May 2023 at the Innovation in Politics Awards which took place at the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw.

A number of distinct advantages have emerged from having a regional caucus structure. Multipartisan working at regional caucus level has demonstrated that projects and initiatives which work at regional level can be mirrored at county level and adapted to suit local circumstances and needs. The WoMeN's Regional Caucus has also found that

membership of a regional caucus can strengthen the capacity and influence of Councillors to advance policy initiatives within their local Councils. Regional caucuses can also mitigate local challenges by providing a larger group to act as a sounding board and achieve consensus.

The WoMeN's Regional Caucus will be publishing a final report on successes & learnings taken from the pilot project in the Autumn of 2024 which will help to create a blueprint on how to roll out a Regional Caucus Network across the full 31 local authorities. The report will also serve as a useful tool in illustrating key learnings and insights which other local authorities and local caucuses can learn from.

## Recommendation

- Resource and support the roll-out of the Regional Women's Caucus Network across all local authorities.

# Working with People with Disabilities

The 2022 census shows that the number of people living with a disabling condition is currently 1,109,557 people, representing 22% of the population. This is a sizeable electoral demographic, approximately one in five people in each community. Therefore, there is an imperative desire to see positive change for disabled people.

A community that is accessible for disabled people is accessible to all. The ALLG's vision for Local Government includes five broad themes in relation to disability:

1. A central role within local authorities, which is properly resourced, is guided by the voice of local disabled people and has responsibility for disability access and inclusion e.g. a full-time<sup>1</sup> disability access officer for each local authority.
2. Housing for all, including housing for people with disabilities.
3. Full participation of disabled people in public and political life.
4. Accessibility of the built environment and local amenities.
5. Access to information in preferred and accessible formats.

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**Local Government has a responsibility to ensure the inclusion of disabled people in communities.** ”

We believe there is an opportunity to build fairer, inclusive, and equal communities – that can be accessed and enjoyed by all. The actions above are not a comprehensive list of all that can be done to improve inclusion and equality for disabled people at a local level. They are some practical ways that real, impactful change can be made immediately.

## Recommendation

- Ensure that local government and our local authorities fulfill their responsibility to ensure the inclusion of disabled people in communities.

[1] Access Officers in many Local Authorities divide their time for this role with several other responsibilities, while in a minority of cases the role is full time. The role is not standardised and is not across the country and no budget is allocated centrally to support the implementation of disability focused initiatives. This must be addressed as a priority.

# Appendix 1 - *Summary of Proposed Councillor Representation*

## Summary Analysis of Councillor Representation 2024

### Current Position

Total Population Census 2022	5,149,139
Total Number of Councillors (Excl. Limerick DEM)	949
Councillor per Head of Population	5,426

### Current Local Authority & LEA Breakdown

LEA Size (Member)	3 Member LEA	4 Member LEA	5 Member LEA	6 Member LEA	7 Member LEA	Total
No. of LEA's	5	17	37	68	39	166
No. of Councillors	15	68	185	405	274	949

## Appendix 1 - *Summary of Proposed Councillor Representation*

### Proposal - Increase in Number of Councillors based on 2013 Local Boundary Review for 2014 Local Elections i.e. Putting People First Councillor Ratio per Head of Population

#### 2013 Local Boundary Review

Total Population Census 2011	4,588,252
Total Number of Councillors	949
Councillor per Head of Population - LE 2024	4,835

#### Proposal

Total Population Census 2022	5,149,139
Councillor per Head of Population Ratio	4,835
Total Number of Councillors Req'd (Excl. Limerick DEM)	1,065
Increase in Number of Councillors	116 (+12%)





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