

Good morning Chairperson, Deputies and Senators,

It is my pleasure to be here this morning at this meeting of the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government and to discuss my proposals for the Local Government (Establishment of Town Councils Commission) Bill 2017.

Earlier this year the Dail debated my proposals at second stage of the Bill and on that day I set out the rationale for the re-establishment of Town Councils in Ireland.

Along with this opening statement I have attached an explanatory memo on the bill setting out the nuts and bolts of how it would operate.

At the outset I wish to explain how I was a member of my local Town Council in Navan for 17 years and my County Council in Meath for 12 years and so I know the immense benefit of good local government on people's lives.

Equally I can see quite clearly how large urban areas have suffered as a result of the abolition of town councils since 2014.

This in particular is evident at the preparation of budgets where the spend in a dedicated urban centre has now been assimilated into the county spend and in its place a small discretionary budget has been put in place.

It is nothing more than a smokescreen and a poor one at that where areas are being thrown the crumbs from the LPT table and councillors who received nothing in the past are expressing gratitude as a result.

Now for councillors in areas that never dealt with substantial local budgets before and subsequently see a few euros being spent in an area there is a belief that this is positive local governance.

For those who served former Town Council areas the situation is even worse as they had previously dealt with the consideration and passing of budgets worth many millions. These have now been eradicated down to a contribution of mere thousands.

The context of why I am doing this is very clear. Our towns are under threat not just from economic forces but from planning whereby people and employment zones are being forced through overarching plans to be based in the largest cities.

Our towns through the loss of their statutory planning and budgetary plans are left at a distinct disadvantage in trying to promote their town centres.

Throughout my time on both Navan Town Council and Meath County Council the financial position of both bodies could not be more stark.

Navan Town Council always recorded a surplus on its revenue accounts during that period while in stark contrast Meath County Council were in debt to the tune of over ten million.

When as a council we wanted to proceed with projects to enhance our town such as major street refurbishment and in particular the construction of a multi-million euro theatre and arts centre we were able to leverage funds with the banks because we had our own financial independence.

Consequently by raising finance through new local funding streams we were able to demonstrate to the banks that there would be a dedicated source of funding provided in order to repay the bank loans.

Politically – and this is the crucial point – because we were a stand-alone statutory body this piece of business was able to be conducted by the nine elected members of the people of Navan, and not the county councillors from other electoral areas.

What I have noticed since the abolition of town councils is that plans such as those I have just mentioned or expenditure for town centres has become increasingly controversial and difficult to pass at full County Council meetings because councillors from other areas are objecting to what they see as preferential treatment for towns.

This should not be the case and where we have large urban centres where such a large proportion of local property tax, commercial rates and other parking and revenue charges are raised they deserve to have statutory bodies to ensure the spaces where they live are enhanced and given dedicated service to ensure they are viable places to live, work and enjoy recreational spaces.

“Towns that people can live, work and play in.” These are the infamous buzz words that planners at a local and national level love to spin but seem to forget anytime plans are compiled and thus condemn people to live in soulless suburbs without any of the necessary social facilities, which makes a town a community.

Local democracy works best when the public representatives for the area have proper powers to deliver the best results for those they represent.

That effectiveness has been radically diminished since the abolition of town councils and any officials trying to say that this is not the case are simply protecting the status quo and are neither listening to the people of these towns or indeed the TDs and Senators who have spoken passionately on this subject. And I want to thank all the TDs who supported the Bill at the second stage in July.

We have one of the most centralised government systems in the Western world and this is a point which has been factually proved by Dr Sean O’Riordan from the LGIU.

We have one of the lowest levels of public representation in Europe.

- In France there is 1 public rep for every 118 persons
- In Denmark which is a country similar in size to our own the ration is 1 to 1,115.
- In Ireland that figure is 1 to every 2,815.

The only country with a ratio nearly as bad as ours is the UK where the ratio is 1 to 2,660.

So for people to say we are over represented by politicians the stats show that we are not.

In conclusion members I want to finish with some comments from my colleague Deputy Michael McGrath who spoke in the Dail chamber on this bill and explained how he started off his political life on the small town council of Passage West.

It was not a large town council and did not have a massive budget. But Michael makes the point of how its very existence ensured that a town manager, town engineer and other members of the executive had to come to the town at least once a month and present themselves before the members elected by the people of that town to explain deficiencies in service and how they were going to sort it.

The simplicity of that practice alone ensured there was accountability for local people.

That no longer happens.

Members we need proper and full accountability and we need strong local governance. I am seeking to make sure we put that back in place and give a vote of confidence to local councillors in running affairs of their local towns.

I don't want to see the towns where people live starved of funding in a system that is already starved of funding and under resourced in the first place.

This bill is the first step in putting back in place a town council system that will be fit for purpose. So that the people living in the urban centres of this country – whether it be in Tralee, Drogheda, Bray, Kilkenny or Navan will get the special focus that can only be delivered through the re-introduction of our town councils.

Thank you and I would welcome any questions you may have.



Shane Cassells T.D.

Meath West Constituency

Fianna Fáil Spokesperson for Local Government

