

Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government

Meeting to discuss Local Government Reform

31 May 2018.

I would like to thank the Chair and members of the Committee for the opportunity to discuss the potential measures to build on the reforms to local government that have taken place over the last number of years.

I am joined today by officials from my Department, Mr Paul Lemass, Mr Diarmuid O'Leary, Ms Lorraine O'Donoghue and Ms Áinle Ní Bhriain.

Introduction

The Programme for a Partnership Government (PPG) sets out a number of requirements in relation to local government reform. In particular, the PPG envisages the submission of a report to Government and the Oireachtas on potential measures to boost local government leadership and accountability, and to ensure that local government funding, structures and responsibilities strengthen local democracy. Today's engagement forms part of that consultative process.

To date the Department has published two papers on this topic. The papers presented today for consideration by the committee address **Municipal Governance**, including the questions of local electoral areas and town councils and **Local Authority Boundaries** where urban development crosses local authority boundaries.

Municipal Governance - Enhancing municipal districts

The Municipal Governance paper sets out a range of proposals to strengthen the current municipal district system within local authorities and to address identified shortcomings, rather than re-establishing town councils.

The paper sets out a strong rationale for this approach, not least the fact that local authority members, as represented by the Association of Irish Local Government, are not calling for restoration of town councils.

The AILG preference is for stronger powers for municipal district members, greater focus on towns, and reduction in the territorial size of excessively large local electoral areas, which the review of local electoral areas that is now almost complete will address. The proposals in the Municipal Governance paper are based mainly on these objectives.

Some of the specific proposals in this document include measures to reduce the excessive size of many local electoral areas and ensure that all areas are as coherent and reflective of local identity as possible including designation of distinct town-based LEAs for larger urban centres (15,000 or more population). The work of the Local Electoral Area boundary committees is addressing this issue.

The document also proposes measures to achieve greater “town focus” in local government arrangements, especially in larger urban centres, where the municipal districts could be re-titled “Town Districts” or “Borough Districts”, with the name of the relevant town included in the title in all such cases (e.g. Wexford Borough District,

Navan Town District, etc). Local authorities will also be given a right to petition the Minister to rename any district;

The document proposes to strengthen the role and capacity of the elected members at municipal district level, particularly in budgetary and local development matters, to promote the economic and social development of towns as well as addressing any possible inconsistencies in the way the current arrangements are being operated. Municipal district members already have significant powers but the application of these powers seems to differ across the country.

The financial capacity of elected members at municipal district level has been highlighted as being of particular importance. Proposals to address this include restoring earmarked roads funding for larger towns; strengthening the role of municipal district members in the local authority budget process, including in relation to aspects such as the General Municipal Allocation, the Schedule of Municipal District Works, and the Draft Budgetary Plan and other relevant budgetary proposals and reports, and bringing greater clarity and focus to the municipal district members' decision-making authority over a range of discretionary funding.

There will also be an examination of the apparent gap in urban renewal or development funding for some important towns; and strengthening the role of district members in the local authority budget process

Funding under Project Ireland 2040, through the Regeneration and Development Fund, will be important in this context.

Local Authority Boundaries

The second paper I am discussing today is titled “Local Authority Boundaries” paper. In this paper, enhanced statutory provisions are proposed to address the issue of urban development crossing county boundaries. In such instances, this paper proposes new statutory joint structures, rather than either alteration of county boundaries or reliance on existing provisions for voluntary co-operation.

These joint structures will focus particularly on the forward planning of the areas in question. They will not duplicate the role of other agencies, for example those specifically dealing with tourism, inward investment and economic development.

Joint structures would have responsibility for the development and planning of the entire area of a town or city that crosses a county boundary (for example in Athlone, Carlow, Drogheda and Waterford), including responsibility for certain key strategic matters beyond the existing standard functions of local authorities, especially in relation to spatial and economic planning and development.

These structures would also have responsibility for transportation strategy, forward planning and land use designation, and retail strategy (and any other such matters as both local authorities may agree).

Such structures would not, however, have responsibility for delivering existing local authority functions, save in such circumstances as agreed by the relevant authorities.

It is also proposed that provision for statutory joint structures would be accompanied by a clear legislative guarantee for the permanent integrity of local county identity and traditional allegiance through legislative provision to copper-fasten the status of the cities and counties as territorial units.

In short, it will no longer be possible to alter a boundary between two local authorities without the consent of both authorities.

Other developments in relation to Local Government

Local Authority Structures and Governance

I will shortly be bringing papers to Government on Local Authority Structures and Governance. One paper will set out, for further consideration, a range of proposals in relation to local authority governance, leadership and administration, which are referenced for consideration in the PPG. The proposals being put forward for consideration will address:

- Tenure and role of mayors and chairs:
- “Ancillary” governance structures and processes:
- Other possible measures to enhance council effectiveness

A further paper will deal specifically with legislation relating to the extension of the boundary of Cork City and consideration of the report of the Galway Expert Advisory Group.

Recommendations of the Galway Expert Advisory Group

In the case of Galway, the Expert Oversight Group has endorsed previous recommendations for amalgamation of Galway City and County Councils, to take effect not later than 2021, but recommends that the existing councils as currently constituted should continue for the purposes of the 2019 local elections.

Other specific measures recommended by the oversight group included measures to strengthen municipal districts in general and increased resourcing to enable them to realise their full potential. This recommendation dovetails with the recommendations put forward in the Municipal governance paper.

It should also be noted that the group recommended additional measures to address the deficiencies in human resources and financial resources prior to the merger process.

Cork Boundary alteration.

In December 2017, the Government decided to proceed with extension of the Cork City boundary as was recommended by the Advisory Group, and agreed a revised boundary delineation recommended by an Implementation Oversight Group report in December 2017.

The General Scheme of a Bill to provide for the Cork Boundary alteration and arrangements related to its implementation is being submitted to Government.

The scheme will address the need for detailed planning and implementation of the reorganisation process and the role of the respective local authorities and the

Implementation Oversight Group. The legislation will also address the timing of the transition from both a financial and operational perspective.

Local Electoral Area review

As you are aware, two Local Electoral Area Boundary Committees were set up on 13 December 2017 to review and make recommendations on local electoral areas in advance of the 2019 local elections.

The policy objectives of the review are to reduce the size of territorially large local electoral areas and to designate urban-focused local electoral areas around the larger towns in order to enhance good local government. In doing this, the Committees will have regard to the results of Census 2016.

Over 370 submissions have been made so far to the two Committees – submissions are still being made in respect of Galway City and Galway County. The committees are due to complete their reports by 13 June 2018.

Upcoming reports

In the coming weeks, further policy papers will be submitted to Government and thereafter proceed to this Committee for its consideration.

These papers will examine in detail other local government issues, including those identified in the Programme for Partnership Government, namely

- local authority functions, particularly through the devolution of centrally held functions and powers.
- leadership, including directly elected mayors for cities, and

- governance of our cities in a manner that will facilitate their planned and sustainable future development, in line with the objectives of the National Planning Framework.

I do not wish to pre-empt these policy reports or indeed our future discussion on the matters therein. However, I anticipate that the report on political leadership will consider the issue of full time, full term mayors or cathaoirligh. It will also examine the possibility of the direct election of mayors for Ireland's cities.

In doing so, it will consider the division of executive and reserved functions in local authorities, and examine alternatives.

I look forward to returning to this forum in the near future to discuss those papers and the upcoming legislation in more detail and I am confident that the measures outlined, combined with those in development will significantly enhance the capacity of local government to deliver effective efficient and quality services to all citizens..