



Thursday, October 19, 2023

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage by AnnMarie Farrelly, Chief Executive, Fingal County Council,

Topic: *Consideration of the Citizens' Assembly report on the Directly Elected Mayor of Dublin*

As Chief Executive of Fingal County Council I welcome this opportunity to address the Committee as it considers the Citizens' Assembly report on the Directly Elected Mayor of Dublin.

Along with the Chief Executives of the other three Dublin Local Authorities, I addressed the Citizens' Assembly in Malahide on Sunday, May 1st, 2022. We all spoke of the need to retain the existing local authorities and I am pleased that one of the 18 recommendations in the report is the retention of existing local authority structures.

Many of the recommendations from the Citizens' Assembly are wide-ranging and there is a lot of detail that will have to be worked out before they can be implemented. It is acknowledged that Ireland has a very centralised form of government with local authorities performing fewer functions than municipalities across Europe. Dr Mary Murphy of Maynooth University, in the research paper "Democracy Works If You Let It", found that only 8% of Irish public spending occurs at local government level, compared to an EU average of over 23%, and that a quarter of the Irish spend is not fully under local authority control.

The recommendations in the report propose devolving a wide range of powers to a directly-elected Mayor and creating new local government structures in Dublin. Some of these powers, such as responsibility for Primary and Community Healthcare, Transport, Education, and Policing, currently lie across various government departments and agencies while Water is the process of being handed over to Uisce Éireann by the Local Authorities after many years of negotiations.

There will need to be a willingness within Central Government to hand over responsibility and funding to the new local government structures as well an appreciation of the scale of the structures and resources that will be required to deliver these additional services through the local authorities.

The present situation, where the four local authorities deal directly with the various Government departments and agencies for a wide range of services, already has a lot of

bureaucracy. There is a realistic fear that placing another layer between the local authority and central government will add further complexity when the objective is to become more efficient and deliver better outcomes.

The question of how the new structure will be funded will also have to be addressed. At present the four Dublin local authorities have, between them, revenue budgets totalling €2.12 billion and capital programmes worth €5.9 billion. That money is accounted for and is used to deliver over 1,000 different existing services to the people of Dublin City and County as well as building the infrastructure to allow the Dublin region grow sustainably.

In Fingal we have just unveiled a three-year capital programme worth €1.35 billion with 67 of the 312 projects already on site. Those projects will deliver much needed infrastructure to a county with a growing population, so it is important we are able to maintain that level of delivery into the future.

Clarification is also needed around the structure and membership of the Dublin City and County Assembly and its relationship with the Mayor, their cabinet and the local authorities. Will the Assembly's membership be made up of existing councillors from the four local authorities, or will it consist of a totally different cohort of public representatives?

There would be better linkage between the Assembly and the Councils if the membership of the Assembly consisted of councillors elected by their respective councils, similar to the membership of the Regional Assemblies. The number of councillors from each Council should be based on the population of their respective local authority areas so there is equitable representation. There were 12 councillors on the Citizens Assembly and, because the allocation of seats was proportionate to the relative strength of the parties or groups across the four Dublin local authorities, Fingal ended up with only one councillor among the 12.

The membership of the Mayor's Cabinet also requires in-depth examination as it is recommended the majority of members will be councillors. This could mean that a councillor is a member of their local council, a member of the Plenary Session, a member of the City and County Assembly and a member of the Mayor's cabinet. This will be a heavy and demanding workload and I note the recommendation that councillors should be paid, full-time public representatives with secretarial support.

As a local authority we are the closest form of government to the people. Fingal makes up 49% of County Dublin, our Council has become the third biggest local authority in Ireland in terms of population, budget and staffing numbers. Our councillors and staff have worked hard over the past 30 years to develop a distinctive and self-reliant Council that has created a part of Dublin which people enjoy living in.

So, whenever a plebiscite on a directly-elected Mayor for the City and County of Dublin is held, it is of the upmost importance that the citizens are fully informed of what is

being proposed; are made aware of the scale of what will emerge; are shown how it will be funded; and are able to understand the impact it will have on the delivery of services and infrastructure in their local area.

Thank You.

ENDS