

19<sup>th</sup> October 2023

**Opening Statement by Colm Ward, Chief Executive, South Dublin County Council to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage in relation to Consideration of the Citizens' Assembly report on a Directly Elected Mayor of Dublin**

Chairperson and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Joint Committee in relation to the Citizens' Assembly report and recommendations for the proposed Directly Elected Mayor for Dublin.

The various issues concerned have been comprehensively covered in both the deliberations and the final report of the Citizen's Assembly. In addition, as public servants and already accustomed to delivery of a range of legislative responsibilities, South Dublin County Council will of course adapt to the future model and associated structures that are arrived at through the process. In that context and at this juncture, with the specific terms (and outcome) of a plebiscite on the Directly Elected Mayor not yet known, detailed commentary on my behalf in relation to the role and its responsibilities is somewhat speculative and premature. Notwithstanding that, I take the opportunity below to highlight certain high-level issues to be considered in moving this process forward.

Firstly, I believe it is vital that such a plebiscite clearly details what future regime voters are being asked to decide upon, rather than presenting a binary choice, akin to say the United Kingdom's EU referendum "Brexit" vote, which may leave more questions than answers afterwards. A clear understanding by the electorate of the implications and outcome of a vote for the Directly Elected Mayor is essential.

In my view, it is also important that any new structure introduced does not devalue the individual identity of any of the existing four Dublin local authority areas or, indeed, present the potential to reprise past circumstances which resulted in the under prioritisation of facilities and services to certain communities or geographical areas.

South Dublin County Council was established, along with Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and Fingal County Council, under the Local Government Act 1993, in a pioneering reform of local government and, since then, we have strived to create and shape an identity for South Dublin County developing and delivering key plans, strategies, infrastructure and services for our citizens and particularly working to overcome legacy challenges for the area.

The population of South Dublin is currently 301075 people (2022 Census), or nearly 6% of the national population, but will represent just 20% of the combined Dublin City and County population that the Directly Elected Mayor will oversee. Tallaght, the county town of South Dublin, and its immediate environs, has a population reaching 100,000 people and is at city scale. The need to ensure an equitable focus on the citizens of Tallaght and South Dublin, and all other areas of Dublin City and County, must underpin the proposed new representational, funding and other arrangements under a Directly Elected Mayoral structure.

We have a Council membership of forty locally elected Councillors across seven local electoral areas, who function together in a plenary Council responsible for a range of legislatively reserved functions, as well as four local area committees and a range of other statutory and non-statutory committees that bring local government close to its citizens. While welcoming the recommendation to keep the existing local authority structures, the marriage of this local dynamic with an overarching directly elected mayor, together with an associated cabinet and city and county assembly, needs careful consideration to ensure its optimal operation. The revision of the existing regional assembly tier to support the County and County Mayoral structure along with providing appropriate remuneration that recognises the enhanced role of elected Councillors in such a structure are particular elements that could serve to enhance such proposed future arrangements.

This Council has a current workforce comprising just over 1,500 posts across areas including housing, economic development, climate action, infrastructure, community development, public realm etc. Our revenue budget for 2023 totaled €306million while our current three-year capital programme for the period 2023 to 2025 amounts to €1.15billion. The scale of these budgets gives the committee an insight into the associated volume and range of existing services, programmes and projects being delivered by the staff of this Council as but one of four Dublin local authorities.

The Dublin local authorities have a long history of collaboration together and with other national and local bodies in relation to housing, enterprise, tourism, active travel, climate action, emergency services and many other areas, from which the committee can take confidence for any proposed future arrangements. However, the potential sharing or removal of some existing areas of local authority responsibility upon the establishment of a Directly Elected Mayor's office alone will likely present considerable challenges, even without the addition of the further proposed responsibilities from outside the current local authority

remit as envisaged in the Citizen's Assembly report. The challenges and timeframes involved in progressing to a single national water utility in recent years should be very informative when considering the potential consolidation of a multiplicity of functions from across four of the largest local authorities in the state and from a range of central government and national bodies. The willingness of all relevant agencies and departments to be part of that change along with the Dublin local authorities will be critical to its success.

The considerations as outlined above are initial high-level observations intended to inform the pathway forward in delivering on the political will and the clear wishes of the Citizen's Assembly to establish a Directly Elected Mayor for Dublin, and the valuable work of the Citizen's Assembly on this issue is fulsomely acknowledged.

I am happy to engage further with the committee at any stage in future as that pathway becomes clearer.

END.