

Thursday, October 19th, 2023

Opening Statement by Richard Shakespeare to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage

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

I welcome the opportunity to address this committee on the Plebiscite for a Directly Elected Mayor for Dublin. The work of the Citizens' Assembly should be commended. It is an ambitious and transformative proposal, a statement of intent to strengthen local government in its powers, funding and representation in recognition of the Dublin regions' importance.

Dublin City Council has a long and proud tradition of serving the public and leading the direction, growth and development of the City. The City Council comprises 63 elected members whose term of office commenced in June 2019. The executive together with the elected councillors have an ambitious vision for Dublin City, to be *A dynamic, sustainable city that is future-ready, built on thriving, inclusive neighbourhoods and communities, a strong economy, a vibrant cultural life, and compact, connected growth*. Our core principles of Commitment to excellent public service; Sustainability; Leadership; Ambition; Fairness and Accountability guide us in all elements of our work, in how we serve our communities and in the impact we have on the environment. More than ever, global and national trends and issues are impacting on the City Region and the Council's internal operating environment is constantly evolving to respond to these challenges and to deliver for the City and region.

As the municipal government for Ireland's Capital City, and the largest local authority in Ireland, the City Council employs approximately 5,900 staff. The 2023 Revenue Budget amounts to €1.24 billion, while the three-year Capital Programme 2023 to 2025 amounts to €2.86 billion.

The Council provides a wide and diverse range of more than 800 discrete services to the citizens of Dublin City (population in excess of 560,000), to businesses and to visitors to the city. Activities are carried out in both the physical works areas (e.g., provision and maintenance of housing, roads) and in the areas of arts, sports, recreation, and social services (e.g., libraries, sports facilities parks, community development and housing welfare services). The City Council provides emergency services and homeless services to the Dublin region through Dublin Fire Brigade and the Dublin Region Homeless Executive respectively.

Council facilities are spread geographically throughout the city and are also located outside the Dublin City Council area. The City Council is responsible for the social, economic, infrastructural, and cultural development of the city. The range of services provided by the Council could best be summarised by listing the programme group structure used by central government to classify the activities of all local authorities as follows:

- Housing & Building
- Road Transportation & Safety
- Development Incentives & Controls

- Environmental Protection
- Recreation & Amenity
- Education, Health & Welfare
- Miscellaneous Services

I know the assembly had input from experts in their fields whether it was on the role of local government, its evolution and comparison to other European Cities where Local Government has responsibility for a much wider range of functions.

The first recommendation of the assembly relates to the powers that should be devolved to a directly elected Mayor and includes:

Housing Homelessness; Economic Development; Infrastructure/Roads/Footpaths; Climate Change; Environment / Biodiversity; Planning / Land Use / Strategic Development; Arts / Culture/ Sport; Night Time economy; Tourism / Marketing; Waste Management; Healthcare – Community; emergency Services; Childcare; Support for Traveller and Roma Communities; Transport; Water; Policing; Healthcare – Primary; Policing; Education – Primary and Secondary; Gaeltacht / Irish Language.

Powers for Further, Higher Education and Skills should be devolved to the directly –elected Mayor and local government between 5 and 10 years.

Many of these functions are already within the core functions of the local authority sector – housing planning, libraries, public realm to name a few. Others are very effectively provided on a regional basis – for example Homeless Services and the Fire Service. In other areas the Council has moved away from the direct provision of some services such as domestic waste and fulfils a more regulatory role.

What is proposed will bring about significant change across the entire public sector. While Dublin City Council often acts in partnership or collaborates with multiple agencies or bodies, for example delivering events to promote and support tourism and the capital city, the body with overall responsibility for tourism is Fáilte Ireland. Again the local authority sector has always collaborated and been supported by An Garda Síochána in joint policing committees and initiatives in local community areas, but Dublin City Council currently is not directly responsible and has no powers in relation to Policing.

This is an ambitious programme, and to deliver effectively will require a complete restructuring of not only local government but central government departments and state agencies as well. A clear vision is required and a well-defined road map including the legislative changes required, to enable buy in and to deliver for Dublin and its citizens.

One must reflect on the range of changes and reforms in recent years whether it was the establishment of Irish Water or the National Transport Authority, this is a major departure from what has been occurring over the last number of years and needs careful consideration.

The recommendation of the assembly is that the Directly Elected Mayor should have an explicit power to initiate, and to introduce new regulations in areas of policy where authority or responsibility has been devolved to them – this will require the removal / diminution of power from other areas or bodies to meaningfully effect reform.

A directly elected mayor is achievable, it has the potential to become a catalyst for reforming the public sector and the systems within it. There are clear examples of similar structures in other European cities that work well and where local government has a much broader range of functions but requires buy in from Government Departments and agencies, local authorities and requires strong vision and leadership.

I note the final recommendation regarding the holding of a plebiscite, I fully endorse the proposal that the plebiscite should, and in fact, I would say that it **must** detail the proposed powers of a directly elected Mayor and the structures required, it is critical that the public have a clear understanding of what they are voting for.