

Opening statement by Jim Gavin

**Chair of the Citizens' Assembly on the Dublin Directly Elected Mayor
to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage**

Míle buíochas, Cathaoirleach, as ucht an cuireadh bheith anseo libh ag an cruinniú tábhachtach seo. Is mór an phribhléid dom a bheith anseo Chun ionadaíocht a dhéanamh ar an ochtó comhalta de Thionól Saoránach Bhaile Átha Cliath.

Many thanks Chairman for your kind invitation to be with you today at this important meeting of the committee. It is a great privilege for me to be here to represent the 80 members of the Dublin Citizens' Assembly.

Dublin, Baile Átha Cliath, is a uniquely special place. A county, and city, full of beauty and charm, character and characters, rich in culture and history, sport and music, a place for business and leisure, work and pleasure.

But above all, Dublin is its people, in all their diversity. Young and old, native and newly-arrived, north-sider and south-sider, farmer and financier, teacher and tech worker, rural and urban. Dublin is bustling and thriving, gritty and glamorous, historical and modern, a place that its diverse citizens and residents are proud to call home, and a source of endless enchantment.

But does it have world class local government structures that support its continuous transformation and ensure that, internationally, Dublin ranks in the premier league of capital cities and counties?

Does it have an elected leader of its own, someone to serve and stand tall for the city and county, to champion Dublin on the national and international stage?

A person with the mandate, power and means to drive reform, coordinate strategy, implement policy, deliver services and ensure that Dublin's future is safeguarded. Someone who is accountable to all of its citizens, and who is in touch with the people and communities that are Dublin's heartbeat.

Like all cities and counties of its size, Dublin faces major challenges. These include housing, homelessness, transportation, infrastructure, sustainability and lots more besides - challenges that affect the daily lives of all who call themselves Dubliners.

When I was approached to become Chair of the Dublin Citizens' Assembly, I accepted without hesitation. I can declare, with absolute certainty, that I do have a vested interest. I am a proud and passionate Dubliner. I want Dublin to take its place amongst the great cities of the world - renowned for its quality of life, its sustainable environment, its cultural diversity and economic vibrancy.

The Dublin Citizens' Assembly has been an extraordinary exercise in deliberative democracy. It has placed the people of Dublin at the heart of creating a vision for how the city and county should be managed and governed to make it an even better place to

live, work, raise a family, visit and enjoy. As I began this journey with the other members of the Assembly, in the historic grandeur of Dublin Castle, I didn't fully appreciate just how momentous an initiative this would turn out to be. It has truly been a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The Assembly do not pretend or claim to have found all the answers. But we have carefully considered the issues that affect the governance of our city and county today. We debated, long and hard, about the reform of local government that Dublin needs in the coming years and decades.

The Dublin Citizens' Assembly response to their mandate from the Houses of the Oireachtas is based on factual information and evidence from a wide range of experts, academics and practitioners, including local government specialists, political scientists, international mayors, serving and former politicians and the mayors and CEOs of the four Dublin local authorities.

The Assembly members pored over this evidence during many months of discussion, reflection and questioning and considered these complex issues from all perspectives. The final result of this deliberation is a strong recommendation to create a powerful new Mayor of Dublin as a substantial political figure with wide-ranging powers to lead, deliver, represent and be accountable for our capital city.

The Assembly have also voted to create a new vision for local government structures in Dublin that befits a modern, dynamic, and diverse European and global capital. The members have spoken loudly and clearly about the need for reform and their recommendations on a series of new structures to support the new directly-elected mayor will represent a major change in how our city is run and will, I believe, transform the shape and direction of local government in the city and county for generations to come.

Responsibility for housing, homelessness, community healthcare, transport, the environment and emergency services were among the 15 areas recommended to be devolved immediately to the new Mayor. 6 other areas including Policing, Water, and Education were recommended to be devolved after 5-10 years.

The Assembly also recommended a series of new local government structures to support and sit alongside the new Directly Elected Mayor.

We have delivered our report to the Oireachtas on time, on schedule. Our recommendations demand extensive legislative and administrative change, and brave political leadership. They require significant financial resourcing and an ambitious and focused approach to implementation.

As we concluded the work of the Dublin Citizens' Assembly, we learnt that Ireland sat, disappointingly, at or near the bottom of the European Union Local Autonomy Index. We need to be ambitious about changing this situation.

As recently as October 2023 a Council of Europe report stated that *"Although Ireland is a solid democracy...it remains one of most centralised countries in Europe"* and

“local self-governance in Dublin City is weak relative to the situation in other municipal authorities and capital cities in Europe”.¹

And while acknowledging that reforms are on the way “such as the first directly elected mayor in Limerick”, the report “recommended the Irish authorities, in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity, transfer additional functions to local authorities, to continue with reforms that increase elected members’ influence over executive matters in all local authorities... and to enhance local democratic control over the administrative structure of local government”.

This is not going to happen easily. It is not going to happen without determination and commitment across the political system. I have seen what can be achieved in less than 6 months by a group of dedicated, committed members of the public who are willing to stick the course, debate, listen and tease out the issues, and come up with workable solutions.

I believe a directly-elected mayor, along the lines recommended by this Citizens’ Assembly, will provide that leadership, enhancing political accountability and democratic engagement.

Finally, some closing words to the members of the Oireachtas, and Government. It is said that “a society grows great when people plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit”. The Dublin Citizens’ Assembly have given our elected representatives clear direction and a vision for the future.

Leadership is about the capacity to turn vision into reality. We look forward to brave political decisions that will devolve power, embrace the principle of subsidiarity, empower local government, and provide for a directly-elected mayor for Dublin.

In the words of the late, great Brian Mullins, an iconic Dubliner, who sadly passed away on the day of one of our meetings, “Stand your ground, don’t give in and keep going”. The response to this report of the Dublin Citizens’ Assembly will help determine the future of this wonderful and special place we call home: Baile Átha Cliath – Dublin.

We wish you well in your deliberations.

Bier bua agus go raibh maith agaibh.

¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/-/council-of-europe-congress-assesses-the-application-of-the-european-charter-of-local-self-government-in-ireland>