



Thursday, November 9, 2023

Statement by Mayor of Fingal, Cllrs Adrian Henchy, to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage

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

As Mayor of Fingal, I welcome this opportunity to present a statement to the Committee as it considers the Citizens' Assembly report on the Directly Elected Mayor of Dublin

One of the main reasons for reform of Local Government in Dublin in 1994 was that having two local authorities – Dublin Corporation and Dublin County Council – was too unwieldy. There is no doubt that what we have achieved over the past 30 years in Fingal would not have happened if we were still part of Dublin County Council.

In 2014, when the four Dublin local authorities were asked to vote on the directly-elected mayor proposal, the elected members of Fingal voted 16 – 6, with two abstentions, against it happening.

That vote reflected a fear within Fingal that is still prevalent today. There is a genuine anxiety among elected representatives and our constituents that the directly Mayor will be totally focused on Dublin City as it makes up 41% of the County Dublin population. We still have councillors who served on Dublin County Council 30 years ago who can recall how resources were allocated prior to its break-up into three separate local authorities. The North County was often over-looked in favour of City areas when it came to funding and the distribution of resources and we fear a return to those days.

One only has to look at the way the 12 councillors on the Citizens Assembly were selected to see another reason for trepidation. Because the allocation of seats was proportionate to the relative strength of the political parties or grouping across the four Dublin local authorities, Fingal ended up with only one councillor among the 12 even though Fingal makes up 49% of the size of County Dublin and has 23% of the population.

Fingal is the third biggest local authority in Ireland offering 924 different services to a population of 330,000 people. Over the past 30 years we have seen our annual budget increase six-fold from €48.8 million in 1994 to €330 million this year while our current

three-year capital programme consists of 312 projects worth €1.35 billion with 67 already on site.

If it is decided that a plebiscite should be held among the people of Dublin to relation to a Directly-Elected Mayor for Dublin then we need to learn the lessons of the Brexit referendum in Britain. It must be made clear to voters what exactly they are voting for and the implications of a positive vote. The recommendations of the Citizen Assembly are short on detail and, on examination, appear to be creating more layers of bureaucracy at a time when the demand from citizens is for less red tape and quicker decision-making.

The wide range of powers which the Citizen's Assembly have recommended for the Directly Elected Mayor are very large and include areas such as Health, Transport, Policing, Education and Water which are already under the control of Government departments and specialised agencies. Water services have just been transferred from the local authorities to Uisce Éireann so are now going to reverse a process that has taken years to complete? There is no expertise within the four Dublin local authorities in relation to Education and Health so how is that going to work without the transfer of hundreds of civil servants from Government Departments into this new Local Government structure.

The recommendations also include the establishment of a Dublin City and County Assembly but there is no detail on where the membership of this body will be drawn from. Is this going to be a halfway house between the Council Chamber and the Dáil Chamber with a new cohort of elected representatives or will its membership be drawn from the existing group of councillors who will also be members of the Plenary body in addition to their own council.

We also need to know what sort of relationship the Directly Elected Mayor and their cabinet will have with the existing local authorities, their chief executives and their councillors.

I agree with the recommendation that councillors should be paid, full-time representatives with secretarial support. The present situation where many councillors are trying to hold down full-time jobs while fulfilling a public representative role is unsustainable and is limiting the number of people who are willing to put themselves forward for election. Since the last local elections in 2019 we have lost several young councillors on Fingal County Council because they were struggling to find the time to properly represent their constituents. At a time when we are trying to broaden the backgrounds of those entering politics, we need to be making it easier for people to commit to the role of public representative.

Fingal is a unique and distinctive location within the Dublin Region which has thrived since the establishment of Fingal County Council 30 years ago in 1994. The decision to introduce a Directly Elected Mayor will represent a major change to government structures in Dublin so it is important that we get it right and make sure that we do not

undo all the good work that has been done since Dublin County Council was broken up and local government in the county was streamlined.

I circulated my submission among my fellow councillors on Fingal County Council for their observations and these are included in the appendix.

ENDS

Issued by:

Cllr Adrian Henchy
Mayor of Fingal

Appendix 1

Observations from Councillors

Cllr Robert O'Donoghue (Labour)

Fri 03/11/2023

Thanks for putting this in Adrian.

100% agree with the submission.

Have a good weekend.

See ye Tuesday.

Rob

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Cllr Paul Mulville (Social Democrats)

Fri 03/11/202

Thanks Adrian,

I would request that the draft be amended to reflect the fact that the elected members changed their position and voted in favour of a plebiscite for a directly elected Mayor in July 2014:

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/fingal-backs-plebiscite-on-directly-elected-dublin-mayor-1.1866149>

The Social Democrats are strongly in favour of the need for a Directly Elected Mayor of the whole Dublin Region (Dublin City and County) with strong executive powers over housing, planning, economic development, transport, education, active travel, waste and environment etc,, as well as revenue raising powers, who could seek an democratic mandate from the people of Dublin to implement a strong programme to transform the region for the better. This would be alongside local "borough" style councils, eg. Balbriggan, Swords, Blanchardstown etc who would continue the important civic representational work on behalf of the local communities in each area.

Best regards,

Paul Mulville

Cllr Robert O'Donoghue (Labour)

Fri 03/11/2023

Hi Adrian,

For me, the important part of that article, is where it states:

"An amending motion from Fianna Fáil providing an opt-out route for any of the four local authorities dissatisfied with plans was also passed."

This reflects your original submission which should be kept as is.

Rob

Cllr Ann Graves (Sinn Féin)

Fri 03/11/2023

A Mhéara, a chara,

There just isn't enough detail to be definitive, we need to see the government proposals to ensure that our unique identity in Fingal is respected without being overly bureaucratic.

While the Sinn Féin councillors support the idea of a directly-elected mayor, we have concerns that there may be a danger that potentially we could end up with a mayor who is city centre centric. The Fingal submission stated that if a directly-elected mayor is to be introduced, the jurisdiction has to cover the entirety of Dublin county in order to ensure there is a cohesive approach.

There have also been suggestions that perhaps there would be an overarching mayor and then four deputies, how would this work? A directly-elected mayor will have a mandate from all of the people of Dublin city and county, they will need to be able to ensure a balance - is this possible or will it result in many layers of a system that is overly bureaucratic?

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Ann

Cllr Joe Newman (Independent)

Sat 04/11/2023

I am opposed to a directly elected mayor. I believe it would be a further diminution of the councillor powers. I am happy to put forward my concerns at a debate should we decide to hold a meeting on this.

Regards

Councillor Joe Newman

Cllr Brigid Manton (Fianna Fáil)

Mon 06/11/2023

Dear Adrian

Thank you for the submission.

Having watched my father for years on Dublin County Council fight to try to get resources for Fingal, I am absolutely against anything that would dilute our ability to concentrate solely on Fingal. If it's not broke why are we trying to fix it. The sharing of a Mayor across Dublin City and County has to favour the area that the directly elected Mayor comes from. As I see it we would be giving control of our resources elsewhere.

The reason we have 4 Dublin councils in the first place was to concentrate the personnel and resources in the areas in which people work and the areas Councillors represent. I think anyone who sits on our area committee will recognise the complexities of trying to represent 3 wards and 17 councillors through one committee. I would see that replicated across Dublin if a directly elected Mayor is introduced.

Having worked in the education system all my life I think we are a long way off being able to manage that entire system of Governance Building acquisition and maintenance staffing professional and ancillary along with educational needs of thousands of children and large cohort of children with additional needs and minority groups such as Traveller children and refugees etc. It would take the entire resources of Fingal County Council and beyond. It has not worked well in other countries where you have people queuing up to live in the areas which get a reputation for good schools and only disadvantaged people willing to move to areas with a reputation for poor schools. Again

we have one of the best school systems in the world with our children performing at a very high level across the world in literacy maths and science.

Brigid

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Cllr David Healy (The Green Party)

Tue 07/11/2023

Dear Adrian,

Thanks for circulating for feedback. On behalf of the Green councillors, our observations are:

- *it's excessively negative as a response
- *we support the idea of a substantial decentralisation of central government powers to local government
- *we support the model proposed by the Citizens' Assembly of a directly elected mayor with a cabinet, accountable to an assembly.

Regards,
David

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Cllr John Walsh (Labour)

Tue 07/11/2023

Dear Adrian,

Thanks for circulating the draft response and for your work on this.

I am making the following comments as I was the sole Fingal Councillor to serve as a member of the Citizens' Assembly.

- The response is too negative in my view towards decentralisation of powers from central to local government and could easily give the impression that as Councillors, we think that the status quo is fine and no major changes in the structure of local government are needed. The recent Council of Europe report pointed out that Ireland is a highly centralised country despite its small size, with fewer powers and resources devolved to local government than most European states
<https://www.independent.ie regionals/cork/news/local-government-in-ireland-lacks-funds-power-council-of-europe-report/a471784602.html>

- Work by Dr Aodh Quinlivan (UCC) and other academics has identified the severe, chronic weakness of local government in Ireland and suggested that Ireland ranks above only Moldova and Russia (neither exactly models of good governance) in relation to over-centralisation of power. While many members of Fingal Council may be opposed to a Directly Elected Mayor, but this perspective should at least be separated from the issue of greater powers and functions for local government which has wide support. The current level of control exercised by the Department of Housing and Department of Public Expenditure over local government in Ireland is fundamentally wrong and undemocratic.
- While it is fair to point out that Fingal was under-represented among Cllrs within the Assembly, the problem for Fingal was that only one party group (the Labour Party) decided to appoint a member of Fingal Council to the Assembly.
- It is important to note that the report of the Citizens' Assembly involved a commitment to retain the four existing Dublin local authorities.
- The Citizens' Assembly report also recommended that any financial powers or ability to borrow money by a Directly Elected Mayor should be exercised 'in conjunction with democratically elected local government representatives'. This should apply to most significant, non-ceremonial powers devolved from central government to the Directly Elected Mayor, so that if a DEM was created, most substantive powers should be exercised in conjunction with the existing councils.
- The report also states that the Mayor should work with a 'Cabinet' made up of a majority of elected Cllrs and clarity is needed on how this might work, but in my view it is a potentially good model for Dublin. The Greater Manchester model of a 'Cabinet' led by the DEM and made up of elected mayors/elected representatives from various urban centres in the Manchester region is a good balance with a high level of local democracy and effective regional leadership. In this system, the Mayor, Andy Burnham, had only limited powers at the start but was able to exercise greater responsibilities by working with and securing support from the elected representatives of the Manchester region.
- I agree with your comments in favour of full-time elected Councillors and this point is well made. The role of Councillor is effectively a full-time role and this should be properly recognised and resourced.

Overall, I strongly support greater transfer of power from central to local government and would support the idea of a Directly Elected Mayor depending on the content of the final proposal from Government.

All the best,

John

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Cllr Jimmy Guerin (Independent)

Thurs 09/11/2023

Mayor,

I am very happy with the work that has gone into this, and I am fully supportive of the contents of your submission.

Jimmy Guerin

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ENDS