

Waterford News & Star

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Directly elected Mayor for Waterford in May

Following the recent completion of the Local Government Bill by both Houses of the Oireachtas, plebiscites will now be held on directly elected mayors with executive functions in the local authority areas of Waterford City and County Council, Cork City Council and Limerick City and County Council, Minister of State John Paul Phelan told the Dáil. It is intended that the plebiscites will be held at the same time as the local elections on May 24th.

“Local government legislation divides local authority functions into executive and reserved functions,” he said. “The proposed office of directly elected mayor with executive functions should bridge the gap between the two categories of functions. It is my view that, subject to some exceptions, responsibility for executive functions could be transferred in their entirety to directly elected mayors. The directly elected mayor would be an *ex officio* member of the elected council and continue to perform the functions currently exercised by local authority cathaoirígh, mayors and lord mayors, including reserved functions. This would encompass a civic and representational role, where the mayor would act as the ‘face’ of the local authority domestically and internationally.”

Given the potentially wide range of functions performed by local authorities, the directly elected mayor's role would need to be supported by a chief executive officer, he said. The executive mayor would have a similar relationship with the local authority chief executive as a Minister has with a Secretary General of a Department.

“The mayor's functions would exclude executive functions related to planning matters, which would remain with the chief executive,” he said. “Chief executives would also continue to be responsible for organisational and staff related matters. This is similar to arrangements in Departments, where the Secretary General is responsible for such matters.”

The elected council would be the primary body with responsibility for oversight of the mayor in the performance of his or her functions and for holding him or her accountable while also exercising its existing and future reserved functions, he said. “I emphasise this point, as it has been raised in many discussions in the Dáil and elsewhere. We are not proposing the removal of any of the existing reserved functions that local councillors have.”

Fine Gael Senator Paudie Coffey said the practicality of electing a mayor directly and having clearly defined responsibilities and roles might not be as easy as thought at first. “Most of us in this House have served on local authorities, and we are very proud of what our elected councillors do,” he said. “However, in recent years there has been an increased level of frustration. Councillors feel that the councils are becoming regulators, and they are just rubber-stamping development plans, budgets or strategies, rather than wielding real power to affect change in their local communities. That is a cause for concern. The Minister of State is taking action to try to address that by rebalancing those powers in favour of the elected council and a directly elected mayor. It is a genuine attempt to rebalance those powers in the local authority system.”

Concern at VAT increase on food supplements

The proposed VAT increase on health food supplements is difficult for many who continue to do their best to look after their health, Fianna Fáil Deputy Mary Butler told the Dáil.

“I refer to calcium and magnesium tablets and Eskimo fish oil for joints,” she said. “The list is endless. Older people whose eyesight is affected by macular degeneration, for example, take a product called MacuShield, which is not available on the medical card and costs €25 for a month's supply. The increase in VAT will give rise to a €5.75 increase in price. It seems that there is not much support from the Government for those who wish to look after their health.”

In response, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said decisions on the VAT rate are made by Revenue, they are not the responsibility of Government. “We need to make a distinction between food supplements in respect of which health claims that are backed up by science are made and those that are backed up by pseudoscience,” he said. “This is an issue we will be discussing a great deal more.”

Number of women in craft apprenticeships very low

The number of women employed in craft apprenticeships is low, reflecting the traditionally low levels of female employment in the craft sectors, Minister of State John Halligan told the Dail.

Replying to Fianna Fáil's Fiona O'Loughlin he said in recent years there has been an increase in the number of women participating in apprenticeships overall, mainly because of the expansion of apprenticeship into new areas. “Many of the programmes are in occupations that have a greater gender balance in the workplace such as financial services and others,” he said. “At the end of 2018 there were 341 female apprenticeships registered, more than double the 2017 figure of 151.”

He said SOLAS, the Further Education & Training Authority, has completed a review of the pathways to participation in apprenticeship for under-represented groups, including women. “Areas highlighted for action include setting targets for female participation, consideration of extending the craft employer bursary to other apprenticeships that have less than 20% female participation and a specific focus on female participation as part of the generation apprenticeship national promotional campaign,” he said.

“Women now feature prominently in all aspects of the national promotional campaign. In the campaign there is a specific focus on encouraging women and girls to consider apprenticeships as a means of launching and developing their careers,” he said. “The forthcoming review of career guidance will focus on encouraging the consideration of apprenticeship options by students at all levels.”