

# MAYOR NECESSITIES FOR CORK, LIMERICK AND WATERFORD

With plebiscites due to be held in Cork City, Limerick and Waterford in tandem with the Local and European Elections on 24 May, for directly-elected executive mayors in any or all of the these local authority areas, if voters back the change, it could potentially be a number of years before such mayoral elections would take place. Report by Niall Murray.

**P**ublic discussions around the fast-approaching votes on the possibility of directly-elected mayors in Cork City, Limerick and Waterford have centred quite narrowly so far on questions of salary, and the potential for elected members to recall someone performing their mayoral duties unsatisfactorily in such a role.

Little enough was revealed until recent weeks about the likely powers of prospective holders of a job which has been mentioned regularly – but expanded on rarely – in debate around local government reform over the last two decades.

In September 2018 the Government received a policy paper on the topic from Minister of State for Local Government and Electoral Reform John Paul Phelan TD, entitled ‘Local Authority Leadership, Governance and Administration’, designed to strengthen local government leadership and accountability.

Since then, the local authority areas where plebiscites will be held on directly-elected mayors with executive functions have been decided.

More than 380,000 voters are due to go to the Local Election polls on 24 May to decide on the membership of Cork City Council, Limerick City & County Council, and Waterford City and County Council. They will also be asked to choose between the current Lord Mayor role (a ceremonial position with a one-year term) and a directly-elected Executive Mayor, whose functions would include a combination of existing councillor and mayor functions, combined with executive functions currently held by local authority chief executive.

A vote on the question will be given to nearly 147,000 people in Limerick City and County, 85,000 in Waterford City and County, and close to 150,000 in the expanded electoral area for



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Cork City Council. For now, the electorate in Galway must wait some time, possibly until after any merger of the city and county councils is decided upon.

Meanwhile, the question of a mayor directly elected by the people of Dublin, parts of Dublin or the wider Dublin region, will be discussed separately in a Citizens' Assembly to be jointly organised by the Department of Taoiseach and John Paul Phelan's officials at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

### INTENTION TO DEVOLVE POWER

However, with the 2019 Local Elections just a matter of weeks away, Minister Phelan held recent discussions with members of Dáil and Seanad Éireann to get their views about the prospective roles of directly-elected mayors in the country's largest cities.

He indicated the nature of the role as he envisaged it, but also committed to consideration of views put forward by opposition parties. On that basis, it is known that a mayor with powers in most areas other than planning – for now, at least – is the kind of role envisaged. "It is the intention of Government to devolve as much power as possible from the hands of the executive to the hands of elected people," Minister Phelan said.

It would not just be the mayor who would have more executive powers, but a team of selected councillors may also form a cabinet of sorts. Under a title yet to be decided, this small group of council members would replace the current system of corporate policy groups, and would comprise chairs of strengthened strategic planning committees (SPCs).

This would effectively make some councillors the lead individuals in the council for certain strategic matters – likely to include planning, transport and housing – in a role which may appear to replicate that of Directors of Services in the current structure.

The Minister, however, has cautioned that senior executives would still have a key role in whichever councils would have Executive Mayors and supporting cabinets of elected members.

It may need greater clarity, but Minister Phelan's vision is for a council chief executive to perform his/her role under an Executive Mayor, in a job similar to that of a secretary general in a government department answering to the minister of the day. This

### CORK LORD MAYOR SEEKS CLARITY ON NEW PROPOSALS

Lord Mayor of Cork Cllr Mick Finn has expressed his concerns about the proposals to change the nature of the position.

Having written to the Government last December to seek clarity on plans for a directly-elected major, he has said that whilst he likes the concept "it would represent a significant change in the nature of the office with obvious repercussions for our current executive and reserved functions of council, management and elected members".

Cllr Finn, who has been active in local politics for many years, is the first independent Lord Mayor in 70 years since 1948, and represents the south central ward of Cork City. He succeeded Fianna Fáil's Cllr Tony Fitzgerald in June 2018, who is critical of the government for not consulting former Lord Mayors like himself. During his term in office, Cllr Fitzgerald was opposed to the early plans proposed.



## DIRECTLY-ELECTED MAYORS

Cork City



Waterford City



Limerick City



*Up to 147,000 people in Limerick City and County, 85,000 in Waterford City and County, and close to 150,000 in the expanded electoral area for Cork City Council will cast their votes on 24 May.*

may, understandably, create uncertainty and concern for those currently in the office of chief executive.

### 'TOO EARLY TO TELL'

'Council Review' sought the views of the County and City Management Association (CCMA), which represents this group, and enquired about any submissions made to Minister Phelan and his department on the issue.

A spokesperson replied that "the CCMA does not have a position on the question of directly-elected mayors". The views were similarly sought from each of the three local authorities where voting is set to take place on the question of directly-elected mayors on 24 May, including questions about potential impacts on for, example, services relating to planning, traffic or other functions.

"It is too early to tell as plans are in their very early stages," a spokesperson for Limerick City and County Council said, and added the council will work with central government in its plans for directly-elected mayors.

Meanwhile, Waterford City and County Council said it is not in a position to comment on likely effects of an executive mayor, in the absence of details about the breakdown of roles that would be involved. Cork City Council said it is awaiting precise details of what is being proposed.

### PUBLIC INFORMATION CAMPAIGN

Up to the time of 'Council Review' going to press, news was awaited on the outcome of Minister John Paul Phelan's deliberations with fellow Oireachtas members, and any changes or refinements to his proposals before they are brought to Government.

Voters can, however, expect that information on what they are being asked to decide will be sent by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to the relevant councils, and circulated to those eligible to vote in the 2019 local elections.

"Once the Government approves the Minister's detailed proposals, they will form part of a public information campaign to be launched well in advance of the plebiscites in Cork City, Limerick City and County and Waterford City and County," a department spokesperson told 'Council Review'.

### DECISION AFTER PLEBISCITES

If there is backing for directly-elected executive mayors in any or all of the three areas, it could potentially be a number of years more before such mayoral elections would take place.

"Based on the relevant provisions of the Local Government Act 2019, signed into law on 25 January 2019, the Minister has two years following the plebiscites to bring forward to the Oireachtas proposals to address their outcome, presumably including heads of bill/new draft legislation," the department spokesperson noted.

This could bring us to 2021 before any legal standing is given to the future job of a directly-elected mayor – 20 years after Irish law first allowed for the possibility of such a role.