

SO, WHO RUNS LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

The prospect of directly-elected mayors for certain local authorities may prompt more public debate about how services in their local areas are decided upon and funded. Keynote speakers who addressed the issue at a recent lecture hosted by Centre for Local & Regional Governance in UCC, spoke to Niall Murray about the future of local government in Ireland.

The question of 'Who Runs Local Government?' which was addressed by a number of keynote speakers, formed the main part of the Fourth Public Lecture Series, hosted by UCC's Centre for Local & Regional Governance (CLRG) on 14 March.

For one speaker, the upcoming plebiscites around executive mayors represent an opportunity for long-needed meaningful debate. Offering the national perspective, Jan O'Sullivan TD, Labour Party's Housing and Local Government Spokesperson, said that more power should be given, while more decision-making should be provided for at local level.

"It has been promised, but not delivered, by various governments," she said. "A lot of decision-making, as well as the funding stream spent at local levels, comes from national government rather than local government. There's very little responsibility or power at local government level," noted the Limerick City TD.

EUROPEAN STATISTICS

She pointed to European statistics that reflect Ireland's lowly



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position, particularly in comparison to Scandinavian countries, around this question. Ireland is ranked 28th out of 31 countries when the proportion of public spending allocated at local government level is examined.

Only in Greece, Cyprus and Malta does local government spend proportionately less of all public budgets than the 7.5%

LOCAL GOVERNMENT



Pictured at the 4th Public Lecture Series in UCC on 14 March (l-r) Jan O'Sullivan TD, Labour Party Spokesperson on Local Government; Dr Theresa Reidy, UCC's Department of Government & Politics (chairperson); Dr Aodh Quinlivan, Director of the Centre for Local & Regional Governance (CLRG); Cllr Mary Rose Desmond, currently an elected member in Cork County Council who will stand for Cork City Council in the Local Elections on 24 May (due to the boundary extension), and Fingal County Council's Chief Executive Paul Reid.

allocated by local authorities in Ireland. However, the same Eurostat data for 2016 show that this proportion of public spending is significantly more than the 4.6% of income generated at local government level.

"Even though the money is spent locally, there's no decision-making at that local level," Deputy O'Sullivan said. "In a democratic society, decisions should ideally be made as locally, and as close to people's lives, as possible. But local government in Ireland is quite weak because of this lack of subsidiarity," she added.

In line with this view of the need to keep decision-making as local as possible, the Labour Party has introduced private members' legislation that would restore a system of town councils, which were abolished after the 2014 Local Elections.

Recognising that there were many small towns which may not have required such functions, but other larger urban areas which had none, the bill would set the threshold for creation of a town council at a population of 5,000 people.

RESTORING TOWN COUNCILS

The Local Government (Restoration of Town Councils) Bill 2018 proposes a membership of nine elected councillors, rising to 15 in the case of towns with a population over 25,000.

"We were wrong when we allowed town councils, as the lowest level of local government, to be abolished. This bill would give newly-established town councils similar functions to what they had before, but it's mainly about bringing decision-making processes as local as possible.

"One of the problems about politics in Ireland is that people don't engage unless an issue touches them, and even the number of people who vote in elections is quite low. This is about ensuring more engagement," said Deputy O'Sullivan.

But outside of the existing council structures, she also believes there should be

greater uniformity for regional structures around other areas of governance and oversight, whose boundaries rarely – if ever – overlap.

"We would do things a lot better if there were better co-ordination of, for example, Garda divisions and policing committees, education and training boards, regional health fora, regional assemblies, and so on. We need these things to make more sense, and you need to have coherent boundaries across different functions," she said.

GREATER RESPONSIBILITY

Fingal County Council's Chief Executive Paul Reid agrees with the need for greater responsibility for local authorities, including areas such as health and education. As a former civil servant, leading service reform delivery in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, before taking up his current post just before the 2014 Local Elections, he brings a varied professional background to local government management.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT



He understands very well the widely varying responsibilities and accountability in the private, not-for-profit, and civil service sector in which he previously worked, but also the hugely different factors that drive governance and delivery of services, particularly between the private and public sectors.

Paul Reid's previous employment record includes periods managing significant changes at telecoms firm eircom and overseas aid charity Trócaire, before moving in 2011 to the role of Programme Director for Reform and Delivery at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

"People might expect to see the rules in the private sector applied in the public sector, but the reality is that the private sector doesn't have to make the kind of decisions that public bodies do. The private sector can simply get out of providing certain services if they are not making money," he says.

RESPECTING LEGISLATION

While there have been many criticisms of the perceived handing of greater powers and decision-making to council chief executives under reforms of the past 15 years, Fingal's Paul Reid believes things are not as divisive as some would suggest.

"The legislation defines very clearly who has what decision-making power in what areas, and that has to be respected," he said. For him, it is the relationship between members and management that trumps the distinction between their powers

and functions when it comes to effective local government management. But he sees that as a much greyer area, on which both sides need to work closely in any local authority.

"There's no point in a chief executive driving policy that just doesn't have the support of elected members," he claims, and cites the example of tourism, a policy area not defined as a responsibility of elected members, but which he notes must reflect the views of elected members as policy is brought through Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs).

"But equally, elected members should be taking the advice that is offered by the Executive. That's an area that varies hugely across different councils," he pointed out.

VOICE OF ELECTED MEMBERS

The voice of elected members of local authorities was represented at the CLRG Public Lecture event by Cllr Mary Rose Desmond. She has been a member of Cork County Council since 2014, and is seeking election to the expanding Cork City Council in May.

However, Cllr Desmond has over a decade of knowledge of issues in local government from working with public representatives in her job as parliamentary assistant to Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin TD.

She believes the key function of local government is delivering services for people on the ground, but that the public

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

has a growing perception that they do not have enough access to council officials.

“There can be an ‘us versus them’ thing about councilors and staff, and it’s sometimes tough to work together, but there’s two sides to that. It’s all about working well together and negotiating through budgets and projects, which is what people want,” she said.

“There is very strong accountability for councillors, they’re accessible around the clock and if they’re not, they will pay the price at the next election,” said Cllr Desmond.

Despite this, she believes that the reserved functions of members elected to local authorities are insufficient, claiming that the reforms in the government’s 2012 ‘Putting People First’ policy document had “no teeth whatsoever”.

DEVOLVING DECISION-MAKING

Her other strong view is around the need to devolve far more decision-making and funding allocations from central government to councils. “Around housing, a plan has to be put forward to the Department of Local Government, and then you’ve got a huge void, time in which building work could be done. In order to do any work on housing, that fund has to be approved in the department and the time delays are crazy,” she said.

Cork County Council’s elected member put forward the

area of housing adaptation grants as another example of central government control hindering or slowing delivery of local services.

Applicants seeking to improve access at home for people with a disability are approved relatively quickly by a local authority, but she said their project must then wait several months until the next tranche of funding is released centrally to councils.

“Funding should be released to local authorities to roll out projects with some flexibility, and not be tied up centrally so much as it is under the current system,” she claimed.

Cllr Desmond blamed frustrations like these for the decision of many local authority members not to seek re-election in 2019, but also highlighted the constraints of the role from a practical and personal point of view.

“The job has got a lot busier, meeting times are not helpful for people in other employment. It doesn’t provide a salary that would allow somebody have a home and a life, it isn’t attractive for young people to enter politics,” she said.

In her concluding remarks, she noted that people are paying their property tax and they want to know that services will be maintained in their local area. “That’s what local government is about but we need massive reforms to ensure we can get that done properly.”



“Housing adaptation grants are another example of central government control hindering or slowing the delivery of local services,” – Cllr Mary Rose Desmond.