

AILG HIGHLIGHTS 'DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT' In Irish Local Government

AILG submitted its independent report to a CLRAE European Monitoring Committee during the committee's recent visit to review Ireland, where specific issues relating to local and regional democracy were fully examined.

AILG President Cllr Pat Fitzpatrick said: "Ireland has one of the most centralised systems of government of any European international democracy, and councillors have fewer powers than in almost every other country, in addition to limited revenue-raising and spending powers."

Since the local government reforms in 2014, both the position and powers of the chief executive have increased resulting in a growing imbalance between the executive powers of the chief executive and the reserved powers of the elected councillors, he added.

"Accordingly, this leads to a democratic deficit where decisions can be made without direct democratic accountability. This is outdated, anti-democratic, and no longer tenable and was never acceptable," the AILG President noted.

The final report from the European Committee of Local Self-Government, part of the 46-nation Council of Europe, is due to be published. Two monitoring visits of local and regional democracy in Ireland were previously carried out in 2001 and 2013 respectively.



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LOOKBACK AT LOCAL ACTION PLANS
'Council Review' takes a look over certain parts of the AILG's report from the 'pros and cons' of Ireland's local government reforms of 2014, which brought many structural changes, the decentralisation in other European local government systems and the comparison with the three-tier system of government in Denmark – a country with a population of 5.8 million (similar in size to Ireland), but with 2,432 councillors.

In October 2012 then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Phil Hogan TD, launched a comprehensive Action Programme for Effective Local Government – Putting People First (PPF).

This action plan brought about fundamental changes to Ireland's local government system, covering four main areas including Structures, Funding and Accountability & Governance, Economic Development (and Job Creation) and Delivering Services Efficiently.

Structural changes provided for in the Action Plan and subsequently legislated for in the Local Government Reform Act 2014, provided for the merger of some county and city authorities into one local authority (North & South Tipperary, Limerick City/County and Waterford City/County).

This, along with the abolition of the 80 Town/Borough Councils, has resulted in a reduction in the number of local authorities from 114 to 31 and within those 31 local authorities the establishment 95 Municipal Districts/ Borough Districts/ Metropolitan Districts, representing 166 Local Electoral Areas.

These changes led to a reduction in the number of councillors throughout the State from 1,627 to 949. This reduction

The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) has expressed major concerns to the Council of Europe (COE) and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CLRAE) that Ireland has the most centralised system of local government compared to its European counterparts in terms of powers, functions, service delivery and funding.

represents a 42% decrease in overall numbers (over 33% reduction in real terms due to some elected members holding both town and county seats).

Ireland now has fewer councillors per capita than any other EU country and other democracies examined.

There are 949 elected councillors in Ireland for a population of 5.1 million, compared to similar if slightly larger European countries – Denmark's population of 5.8 million has 2,432 councillors while Finland, with 5.6 million people has 8,859 councillors.

POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

However, the 2014 reforms devolved new powers and responsibilities to local authorities under local economic development, local community development, governance and accountability. This included a new dedicated Strategic Policy Committee for Economic Development in each local authority supported by a dedicated Director of Services for Economic and Community Development.



Since the local government reforms in 2014, there's been a growing imbalance between the executive powers of the chief executive and the reserved powers of the elected councillors, according to AILG President Cllr Pat Fitzpatrick.

The reforms also provided for the establishment of one-stop shops for business support through new Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) and a closer alignment of local and community development with the local government system.

Services administered by local authorities under the reforms are now increasingly funded through the new local property tax, a move designed to strengthen local responsibility for decision-making by the local authorities and their councillors.

The reforms also provided for a new independent National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) to scrutinise local government performance and efficiency. In addition, local authority audit committees were put on a full regulatory footing and the committee's review of Audit Reports is now reported to the council in all authorities.

COMPARISONS WITH OTHER EUROPEAN SYSTEMS

The experience of local government systems in other countries in recent years and their comparison to our local government system is a very interesting and important topic. In Western Europe, the end of the 1970s heralded a period in which a major decentralisation of power took place – except for Ireland. This was followed by the empowerment of democratic regional governments in larger European countries such as Spain, and later on, Britain.

How Ireland compares internationally can be evaluated under three headings:

Representation: The decision to abolish town councils in 2014 following the Local Government Act 2014 reduced Irish local authorities from 114 to 31 compared to 600 when elections were first held in 1899. As a result, we now have one representative per 5,399 citizens, the highest among our European counterparts.

Resources: A total of 8% of overall Irish public expenditure is at local authority level, compared to 23% across 23 comparable EU member states. Ireland is the most centralised state in terms of government expenditure in another authoritative list of 39 European states, trailing after Moldova, Malta, Cyprus and Greece.

Responsibility: Taking these comparative facts and figures about Irish democracy into account, citizenship and public spending matter in the context of the delivery of



health, housing, education and childcare services. This has become even more evident at a time when community security and wellbeing loom large, following the recent public health emergency. Other European countries handle many of these services at a local level where they can be effectively delivered with more political accountability.

DENMARK'S THREE-TIER GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

Ireland's outlier status in these and other areas reveals much about our condition that is not addressed adequately in public debate about potential reforms and political direction. Although this state is one of the richest in the world and classified among its most developed societies, current popular aspirations

for better public and social services may contradict existing methods of governing and taxation to provide them.

A good comparison example is the Danish local government system as Denmark (at 5.8 million people) has a similar population to Ireland. Denmark had a relatively centralised system of local government until the start of their reform programme in 1970, with a strong push for decentralisation, with a subsequent second wave of reforms in 2007.

Denmark has a three-tier system of government, typical of most countries:

- Central Government (Ministries)
- Regional Authorities – 5 Regions (Directly Elected)
- Local Authorities – 98 Municipalities (2,520 directly elected councillors)

Key areas of concern highlighted by AILG's submission:

- The growing centralised nature of Ireland's local government system, including increasing ministerial powers through various ministerial guidelines.
- An imbalance between the elected councillors and the chief executives in local authorities which leads to a democratic deficit where decisions can be made without direct democratic accountability.
- The limited range of functions is carried out directly by local authorities in Ireland compared to other EU countries.

- The lack of formal mechanisms for consultations between the local government associations and central government.
- The low share of public expenditure by local government in Ireland in comparison to other EU countries.

Visit <http://ailg.ie/policy-publications/> to download the AILG Submission.



The Danish basic unit of local government is the Municipality – main town and its hinterland – with local councils each having between 9 and 31 councillors. All local authorities have a finance committee and other committees, responsible for specific areas (such as social welfare). Committees are directly responsible

for preparing and implementing council decisions. The mayor is elected by the council for the full term and is the full-time chief executive of the local authority administration.

At local government level, local authorities in Denmark have direct responsibility for a range of services – primary and secondary schools, childcare, care of the elderly (domestic care, visiting nurses, day-care centres, meals-on-wheels), non-hospital healthcare, most social welfare benefits, business support services and local employment and job centres, social housing, waste management, water supply and treatment; planning, development and urban renewal; fire service and civil defence; public libraries, leisure facilities, local roads maintenance.

In terms of finance and funding, the Danish local authorities derive income from several sources including Local Income Tax (usually 20% of income; Local Property Tax; a proportion of Corporation Tax collected in the local area; General Purpose Grants from Central Government; and local charges and service charges.

The report notes:

“Denmark encompasses the ‘Subsidiarity’ principle, compared to Ireland, under the European Charter of Local Self-Government in terms of reforms and allocation of responsibilities, where services should be provided as close to the citizen as possible.”



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CORK Tel: + 353 (0)21 4775988 | KERRY Tel: + 353 (0)66 9157300 | KILDARE Tel: + 353 (0)45 524520
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