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Local government, 2017

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Another year, another minister, another renaming of the department! Changes to the cabinet in June 2017 included the appointment of Eoghan Murphy, TD, as Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, and John Paul Phelan, TD, as Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government with Special Responsibility for Local Government and Electoral Reform. Further functional realignment also took place: community functions were transferred to the newly created Department of Rural and Community Development and, at the end of 2017, responsibility for motor taxation was transferred to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. Thus, the centralisation of functions traditionally associated with local government continues.

Housing and planning issues

Housing and homelessness continued to be of major concern to local and national government. Over 7,000 homes were delivered in 2017 within the social housing stock designation, with local authorities being responsible for building 1,058 homes (Government of Ireland, 2017).

Various guidelines, reviews and analyses were published and the Rebuilding Ireland action plan continued to have a major influence on local government. A review of social housing design, approval, and delivery process and procedures was made available early in 2017,

leading to changes in the processes and procedures for the approval of construction projects. Revisions were also made to the single-stage approval process for projects costing under €2 million. New guidelines relating to statutory plans, renewable energy and climate change were issued. They outline administrative procedures which should be carried out by planning authorities in the context of any review of, or variation to, a development plan. The guidelines also identify specific national policies relating to renewable energy and wind energy to which planning authorities must have regard. Thus, local government actions will link with national efforts to mitigate climate change. Local authorities were also instructed to prepare and adopt vacant homes action plans by the end of the year, identifying the number of vacant homes in their locality and setting out comprehensive and achievable plans for their usage.

Attempts to reduce the underutilisation of housing stock and inefficient use of land led to the introduction of a Living Cities Bill, which seeks to increase the levy placed on derelict sites and change the definition of a vacant site. The bill had not completed the legislative process by the end of 2017. Budget 2018 announced an increase in the vacant and derelict sites levy from 3 per cent to 7 per cent from 2020 onwards.

Financial and auditing developments

Total gross expenditure (revenue and capital) in 2017 by local authorities was in the region of €6.17 billion, with revenue expenditure accounting for €4.29 billion. Smaller local authorities continue to be more dependent on central government grants, which account for 34 per cent of Monaghan's total income but only 18 per cent of Fingal's income (LGiU Ireland, 2017). The Equalisation Fund totalled over €140 million for 2017 and supported the income in twenty-one of the thirty-one local authorities. In September 2017 local authorities set their Local Property Tax (LPT) rates for 2018. Twenty councils will apply the basic rate of LPT, the four Dublin councils will apply a reduced rate, and seven will apply a rate above the basic rate. The National Oversight & Audit Commission (NOAC) continued its oversight of local authorities. Its report on performance indicators provides valuable information and comparisons for local authorities as well as citizens – e.g. local authorities manage and maintain 94,405 km of regional and local roads; in 2016 over 70 per cent of motor tax transactions were conducted online; the average per capita cost of the

planning service in 2016 ranged from Galway City Council's €36.24 to Cavan County Council's €15.25 (National Oversight & Audit Commission, 2017b). Indicators collated vary from fire safety certificates to social media reach, and NOAC continues to refine the indicators in conjunction with local authorities.

NOAC's *Local Authority Quality Assurance Report 2016* provides a composite report on quality assurance in the local government sector and ensures that the obligations of those responsible for spending public money are fulfilled (National Oversight & Audit Commission, 2017c). Local authorities provide data on projects, procurement processes, specific checklists, self-evaluation of the adequacy of the appraisal/planning, implementation and review work, as well as proposals to remedy any inadequacies found during the quality assurance process.

A Review of the Management and Maintenance of Local Authority Housing examines the effectiveness of local authorities in managing and maintaining their housing stock. Housing units owned by local authorities in 2015 comprised 106,127 houses, 23,447 flats, 770 demountable premises (non-fixed premises) and 259 other units. The report gathers significant data but also conveys the challenges and resource demands perceived by local authorities in managing their housing stock. The review concludes that there is scope to improve management by adopting better practice and makes some specific recommendations on how to improve practice (National Oversight & Audit Commission, 2017a).

Proposals for change

December saw the establishment of two local electoral area boundary commissions, which are expected to report within the first six months of 2018 to enable boundary changes to be implemented before the 2019 local elections.

A number of reports emerged during the year which may lead to further changes in local government organisation. The Galway Expert Advisory Group concluded that the creation of a Greater Galway Authority is technically and administratively feasible, and recommended a merger. The proposition was met with a mixed reaction from politicians and citizens in Galway.

The report of the Drogheda Boundary Review Committee advised that no change to the existing boundary should take place. It recommended that a programme of structured cooperation be immediately

initiated by the Louth and Meath local authorities to develop an innovative governance system for Drogheda. Similarly, the Carlow Boundary Review Committee recommended that there be no change to the existing boundary designation between Carlow and Laois counties, and praised the high level of collaborative engagement between the two local authorities.

The Waterford Boundary Review Committee proposed that 5,500 people and 20,000 acres of south Kilkenny be transferred to Waterford. This proposal also received a mixed reaction. In August the then Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Simon Coveney, TD, issued a statement confirming that he would not be implementing the recommendation to change the county boundaries but would work with Kilkenny and Waterford councils to find ‘imaginative and new local government solutions’.

December saw action on the boundary between Cork city and county. Following the report of the Implementation Oversight Group (IOG), a deal on the city expansion agreed between Cork City and Cork County Council management teams was accepted by members of Cork City Council but rejected by Cork County Council’s elected members. The report recommended a revised city boundary, to include Ballincollig, Blarney, Tower, Glanmire, and Cork Airport and its business park. It also recommended that the extended boundary should be reviewed within ten to twelve years, and that the city should pay compensation annually to the county, index-linked for ten years, to be reviewed after three years, with a more detailed review in ten years. Because of the failure to achieve agreement on the IOG proposals, the minister sought approval to bring forward legislation, if necessary, and the department has commenced work on the preparation of the legislation.

The local government reforms of 2014 continued to influence developments. The *Programme for a Partnership Government* requires the submission of a report to the government and the Oireachtas on potential measures to boost local government, leadership and accountability, and to ensure that local government structures and responsibilities strengthen local democracy. A report has been submitted to government but had not come into the public domain at the end of 2017. Throughout the year a private members’ bill, the Local Government (Establishment of Town Councils Commission) Bill, 2017, generated significant interest among politicians. The bill proposes the creation of a Local Government Commission, which would make recommendations and provide for matters relating to a

system of town councils. Despite numerous parliamentary debates on the proposed bill, it has been given little publicity in the national media.

Looking to the future

The issue of future development was of particular concern to local government this year. As the various stages of development of the National Planning Framework evolved, there were strong reactions. *Ireland 2040 – Our Plan* will guide national, regional and local planning opportunities and investment decisions throughout Ireland for the next twenty years, and aims to coordinate delivery of infrastructure and services.¹ The pre-draft consultation phase saw submissions from various local authorities outlining their priorities for the future development direction of cities, towns and rural areas. Reaction to the second draft was more controversial and, following the ending of the second consultative phase, many local authorities expressed serious concerns about the thrust of the plan. Mayo councillors asserted that the plan was ‘seriously flawed’. Tipperary councillors argued that the proposed National Planning Framework ‘could spell the death knell for Tipperary’s towns and villages’. Mid-west leaders asserted that the plan ‘does little to redress the existing economic imbalance across the country’. The controversy is likely to continue in 2018.

Also during 2017, each of the three regional assemblies published an issues paper to get the process of preparing a long-term regional spatial and economic strategy under way. All local authorities have been invited to make submissions for the strategies, which will be guided by the National Planning Framework. Thus, efforts to align planning at national, regional and local levels are progressing.

Innovation and excellence

Local authorities continued to innovate and improve their services. Kildare County Council linked with NUI Maynooth to implement evidence-based approaches to policy development. Monaghan County Council changed its work processes and procedures, thereby reducing the turnaround time for reletting its housing from nearly 20 weeks to just 8 weeks. Cork City Council implemented a novel Competitive

¹ See <http://npf.ie>

Dialogue Housing Delivery Process. Such best practice is being disseminated to other local authorities. A new service was introduced in 2017 which provides single access for library members to over 15 million items in the 333 library services across the country.

The Excellence in Local Government Awards recognise and celebrate the work of local authorities and showcase innovation and effectiveness. This year recognised projects ranged from Mayo County Council's 'Men on the Move' project to Limerick City & County Council's regeneration programme and South Dublin County Council's local budgeting project, '300K – Have Your Say'.

The local government sector hosted a national tourism conference early in 2017 to highlight the contribution of local government to tourism, from the provision of attractions and infrastructure and the promotion of heritage, conservation and environmental issues to the mobilisation of stakeholders, agencies and groups to promote local tourist offerings. Over 1,400 events and festivals are supported by local authorities every year, contributing significantly to local economies.

Conclusion

Although housing issues continued to dominate, 2017 saw many positive developments in local authorities as austerity eased and human and financial resources increased somewhat. Nevertheless, financial uncertainty and inequality continued as local authorities endeavoured to provide quality public services, increase investment in local economies and promote strong local democracy. In most councils 2017 saw the municipal/metropolitan district structures beginning to impact, local enterprise offices becoming further embedded, and public participation networks and local community development committees gaining traction. Their role and future are likely to feature in discussions linked to the 2019 local elections, which began to be alluded to during 2017. Pivotal documents published during 2017 which are likely to shape the future of local government include the draft National Planning Framework and documents associated with reviews and plans for capital investment. Similarly, discussions on climate mitigation and adaptation responsibilities during 2017 set clear challenges for local government.

Brexit is of major concern to Irish local government and aroused much interest during 2017. Although the AILG (Association of Irish Local Government) has been proactive in helping local authorities to

interpret and understand the ramifications of Brexit, this is uncharted territory for all, with serious implications for border counties in particular. Trade, transport, tourism, culture, cross-border collaborations and shared services are among the very real issues for local councils and citizens. The local dimension of these issues has not featured prominently in Brexit discussions to date.

Gender issues received some attention during the year. One publication of 2017 which may have ongoing influence is IMPACT's interim report, *What Gets Measured Gets Managed: Gender (In)equality in the Local Government Sector*, which focuses on the low proportion of females at senior level in local authorities. In the electoral realm the 50:50 Group continued its efforts to extend the legislative gender quota to local elections. The *National Strategy for Women and Girls*, published by the Department of Justice and Equality in May, promises action to increase the participation of women in local government. These developments may contribute to advancing the gender equality agenda at local level as Ireland celebrates the centenary of female suffrage in 2018.

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