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### ***Local government in the Republic of Ireland***

Mark Callanan (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration; 2018; ISBN: 978-1-910393-23-9; 468 pp; €40)

Local government plays a multitude of roles in Irish society and has a profound impact on our daily lives; however, its role is often understated or misunderstood. In a recent survey carried out by the National Audit and Oversight Commission (2018) it was found that while 92 per cent thought that their local area was a nice place to live, only 26 per cent agreed that their local authority can influence decisions affecting their area. Knowledge of their local council and awareness of services provided were generally found to be low among those surveyed.

In the last decade huge change has taken place at the local government level, including territorial reform, changed functional responsibilities, new financing arrangements and other ongoing reform initiatives. This book is intended as an introduction to the system of local government in the Republic of Ireland, focused on contemporary local governance. It provides a much needed update on a previous publication (Callanan & Keogan, 2003). The author has made a clear effort to ensure this book can be used as an ongoing resource to students and practitioners alike: chapters can be read in isolation, and both the table of contents and index provide easy reference points.

Chapter one sets out the many different ways the role of local government in Ireland can be characterised – as an instrument of local democracy, a provider of services, an agent of central government, a local regulator, and a local leader and coordinator. These roles overlap and clash at times. This chapter sets the scene regarding the limited role of local government in certain functions, and the relationship between local government and central departments and agencies and the local area/citizens. The issues introduced here are expanded on throughout the various chapters.

Before discussing the contemporary structures, roles and functions of local government, the author provides a brief account of the evolution and reform of local government. There have been various reforms over the years – in fact, reform has almost been a constant feature. However, as Chapter Three details, the county remains the core of local government. Reforms are more likely to have taken place at the sub-county or regional level. The public resistance around proposed changes to county boundaries is a prime example of the strong affinity of most Irish citizens with their counties (p. 50).

The role of elected members is diverse and often misrepresented. Chapter Four collates the various different roles to provide a comprehensive picture of the duties and responsibilities of local councillors. This is broadly discussed under three headings: representational, policy, and scrutiny and oversight. A debate has reoccurred over the years around the balance of power between the elected members and the executive, as well as between central and local levels; these issues are dealt with in detail throughout the book. Chapter Four also provides a profile of local councillors, highlighting the under-representation of women and lack of diversity among elected members.

A particularly topical debate concerns the introduction of directly elected mayors, especially in urban areas. Previous proposals and reform efforts on this issue are outlined, none of which have proceeded to date (pp. 91–4). International systems of executive models and the interplay between the political and executive sides are also compared later in the book (pp. 319–22). It is suggested that any future proposals for directly elected mayors, in order to have some chance of success, should provide clarity with regards the powers they would receive.

The functions of local authorities and how they are financed are covered in Chapters Six and Seven, respectively. These chapters provide a thorough account of the system of the local service delivery in Ireland. In Chapter Six, a brief account of the evolution of each of the main functions is provided, followed by a section on ‘future challenges’. This is essential reading for anyone concerned about the future of our local public services and the challenges faced by local government in providing these services.

The second half of the book moves away from the nuts and bolts of local government and discusses topics such as democratic accountability and reform, managerial and administrative reforms, multilevel governance, regionalisation, Europeanisation, localism and centralism.

Chapter 13 compares Irish local government to its international counterparts. The author notes that our system is often (somewhat lazily) compared to our closest neighbour and argues that, instead, comparisons should be drawn with local government systems in a range of other jurisdictions, including similarly sized countries. The chapter identifies key reform trends that have manifested across local government systems in the developed world. It can be concluded, in general, that comparatively Ireland is a highly centralised state with weak local autonomy.

While the relative centralisation of government in Ireland is often the enduring message, this book also highlights the diverse range of organisations and stakeholders with which local government interacts. This vast web of interactions is summarised by the author in a table on pp. 245–8. This table provides just a snapshot of the range of departments, statutory agencies and bodies, and local, voluntary and community organisations with which local authorities are involved on a daily basis to provide key services such as housing, environment and waste management, economic development and local community development, to name just a few.

The final chapter identifies the challenges that lie ahead and how these might influence local government going forward. Among the key debates are the role of the state and the balance between public and private provision of services, and the increased expectations of citizens and demands for better services. This provokes some debate about whether local government should ‘step up’ and be a leader. In recent years we have seen examples of where our local authorities have demonstrated their local coordinating role to provide better environments for their citizens. Collaborative efforts to provide age-friendly environments for older people, led by local government, is just one such example.

Four themes are identified that are likely to shape the future of local government in Ireland. In order to address the challenges it faces, local government must be efficient and participative, it must lead and it must be empowered. This is not a menu of items that can be cherry-picked – all four aspects are interrelated and should be delivered upon in tandem to provide the kind of local government system that meets the demands and needs of our citizens. This book provides a comprehensive overview of the local government system in Ireland and offers a well-informed, thorough and provoking account of the challenges that lie ahead.

## Reference

- Callanan, M., & Keogan, J. F. (Eds) (2003). *Local government in Ireland: Inside and out*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- National Oversight and Audit Commission. (2018). *NOAC report no. 18 – Local authority satisfaction survey 2018*. Retrieved from: <http://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/LA-Satisfaction-Survey.pdf> [30 July 2018].

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