



Administration, vol. 65, no. 1 (2017), pp. 19–27
doi: 10.1515/admin-2017-0003

Local government, 2016

Bríd Quinn

University of Limerick

Among the significant changes confronting local government in Ireland during 2016 was a reorganisation of its parent department. Following the general election and protracted negotiations on the formation of a government, responsibility for local government was placed within the newly created Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. Some functions previously dealt with by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, such as rural development and regional affairs, were transferred to the newly configured Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

In its *Programme for a Partnership Government*, the new government promised to ‘ensure that local government funding, structures and responsibilities strengthen local democracy’ (Government of Ireland, 2016, p. 154). The document also committed to considering:

- directly elected mayors in cities;
- devolution of new powers to local authorities;
- reducing the size of local electoral areas;
- establishing town and borough councils subject to a local plebiscite and local funding.

As part of the reform process, the programme also stated that the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government will, by mid 2017, prepare a report for government and the Oireachtas on potential measures to boost local government leadership and accountability.

Housing issues

Ireland's homelessness crisis, the inadequate supply of houses and the demand for emergency accommodation were causes of major concern for local as well as national government during 2016. Consequently a number of interventions were announced. In June the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government directed local authorities to invite approved housing bodies to develop and submit cost-effective and sustainable proposals to provide independent living accommodation for people with special housing needs under the Capital Assistance Scheme.

Also in June the government announced a Local Infrastructure Fund, from which local authorities could deliver local projects needed to unblock land in high-demand areas. Local authorities may use the funding to provide access infrastructure such as distributor roads, bridges, surface water management, amenities and utility diversion in order to enable private development on major housing sites. A policy document published in July, *Rebuilding Ireland – Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*, set ambitious targets for social housing provision.

The *Performance Indicators in Local Authorities* report published by the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) in November showed that, in 2015, local authorities had provided an additional 9,081 units through a combination of build, acquisition, housing assistance payments, the Rental Accommodation Scheme and leasing (NOAC, 2016c). The increase in relation to units directly provided by the local authority (by building or purchasing) was 42.6 per cent.

In February Minister Alan Kelly, TD, announced a €10 million pilot scheme designed to speed up the 'taking in charge' process of housing estates. The scheme aims to improve coordination between local authorities, Irish Water and other stakeholders, to address infrastructural deficits and to bring in additional funding. The scheme was introduced because 5,600 estates across the country needed to be taken in charge by their respective local authorities.

NOAC carried out a number of housing-related reviews. There were some positive findings regarding housing in NOAC's *Performance Indicators* report, which examined six housing indicators and highlighted the increase in housing output (NOAC, 2016c). It found that 9,081 additional social housing units were made available under the various schemes during 2015. NOAC's separate review of local authority private rented sector functions found significant variations in

approaches and outcomes, and made recommendations about inspection processes, reporting and follow-up processes, and financial management of the function.

Budget 2017 includes a Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund totalling €200 million to relieve critical infrastructural blockages. The budget also provides for local authorities to fund a range of housing services to the value of €92 million from surplus Local Property Tax (LPT) receipts. Such measures underline the continuing significance of housing issues for local government.

Finance

Total gross budgeted expenditure for all local authorities in 2016 was estimated to be in the region of €5.44 billion, with revenue expenditure accounting for €4.04 billion of this amount. The revised estimates for 2016 showed that the Local Government Fund was expected to provide €1.8 billion, with almost a quarter of this coming from LPT and less than 16 per cent from the Exchequer. Local authority operations in 2016 continued to be influenced by the monitoring measures introduced in 2015. Service plans were approved by elected members in each local authority. The emphasis on outcomes, targets, customer service and value for money was strengthened, and NOAC intensified its scrutiny.

The significance of the LPT system was reinforced. Approximately €453 million in LPT was due to be collected in 2016. Nineteen local authorities received monies from the Equalisation Fund while twelve local authorities were allocated additional funding for discretionary purposes. For 2016, LPT rates varied, with twenty councils applying the basic rate while eleven councils applied a local adjustment factor ranging from –1.5 per cent in Louth and –7.5 per cent in Kildare to –15 per cent in South Dublin (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2016).

Efficiency and performance

The Local Government Efficiency Review (LGER) continued to shape the operation and actions of local government. During 2015 the Programme Management Office of the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) had prepared a report for NOAC on progress regarding the implementation of the efficiency reforms advocated by the LGER. This report formed the basis for NOAC

Report No. 5, which identified that 69 of the original 106 recommendations and 16 modified recommendations had been, or were being, implemented by the end of 2015. The commission commended the achievements, stating that 'NOAC considers that this represents a high level of implementation of the reforms and significant change within the local government sector yielding a substantial reduction in overhead costs. NOAC commends the sector for the increased efficiency and consequential savings thus achieved, which are now estimated in the report to be €586.6m per annum' (NOAC, 2016a). The achievements are admirable but the impact on local government has been enormous. Between 2008 and December 2015 employment in local government experienced a reduction of 8,919 (23.6 per cent of WTE). The financial capacity of local government has been similarly depleted with a reduction in local government revenue of over €810 million, while capital budgets dropped by €5 billion between 2008 and 2015 (LGMA, 2016).

NOAC's *Performance Indicators* report provides evidence of improved performance and increased efficiencies over a range of functions. Some examples are outlined below:

- Increased online presence and usage: In 2015 there were more than 55 million page views of local authority websites, an increase of 21 per cent over 2014 figures. By the end of 2015 there were 644,521 followers of local authorities' social media pages. All 31 authorities reported an increase in the proportion of motor tax transactions conducted online, with the number of motor tax transactions conducted online in 2015 reaching 57 per cent.
- Library usage: There were approximately 17.5 million visits to local authority libraries (150,000 additional visits) in 2015 and over 18 million items were borrowed.
- Food waste: The percentage of households availing of the food waste collection service varies significantly. Cork City has a rate of 83 per cent while six authorities have a take-up rate of less than 10 per cent.

These examples illustrate both expanded service delivery and business improvements, and demonstrate the changing approaches of local authorities. It is expected that data for future reviews will be more readily accessible due to the new LGReturns system, which went live in early June 2016.

Local authorities continue to increase the range of services they share. NOAC's Report No. 6 outlined progress on nineteen shared services being facilitated through the LGMA (NOAC, 2016b). Many of these cases follow the lead authority model recommended by the 2010 LGER Group, where one local authority provides a service on behalf of others. Laois County Council is operating the shared services centre, MyPay, for local government payroll and superannuation. Limerick's HAP Hub currently manages housing assistance payments for more than twenty local authorities, including the Dublin homeless pilot.

Local development

At local level, 2016 saw the 31 local economic and community plans, prepared by the local community and development committees (LCDCs), adopted by the elected members and submitted to the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. The plans commit to 5,037 actions in the areas of economic development, social inclusion, community development, health and well-being, rural and urban regeneration, investment and infrastructure. Over 1,701 organisations will be involved in the delivery of these actions. The Local Government Reform Act, 2014, states that public bodies must cooperate with the LCDCs, an obligation which should increase the potential to deliver the agreed actions. However, accessing finance for the plans may be challenging since there is no obligation for organisations represented on the LCDCs to align budgets or pool resources.

In November more than 200 local development and community development stakeholders participated in a national forum to instigate an implementation plan for the *Framework Policy for Local and Community Development in Ireland*, which had been published at the end of 2015.

Public participation networks (PPNs) consolidated their role during 2016. Memoranda of agreement were signed between many PPNs and their respective local authorities. In May the department published a guide to support PPN stakeholders and underpin a nationally consistent framework for PPNs. A PPN National Advisory Group was also established to facilitate further development of the network. *Ireland's Open Government Partnership National Action Plan 2016–2018* articulates an ambition to ensure that PPNs provide the community, voluntary and environmental sectors with meaningful

engagement with local authorities. This ambition was formally welcomed by the PPN Workers' Network during the consultative process.

Jobs and enterprise development

The annual local enterprise office (LEO) jobs survey, published in May, showed that a net total of 3,533 new full- and part-time jobs were delivered in 2015 by the 6,500 small businesses that have been supported by the LEOs in different local authority areas. LEOs gave direct financial assistance to 984 business projects, of which 400 were start-up companies. LEOs also supported 1,896 training programmes involving 27,185 participants and provided mentoring support to 8,175 participants.

The enterprise development role of local government was further strengthened in December when an additional allocation of €1 million was awarded to the LEOs for 2016. The outlook for 2017 is also positive, with a €4 million capital allocation assigned to LEOs in Budget 2017.

The cultural dimension

Since the 1980s The Arts Council and local authorities have worked together to develop the arts. In February 2016 a formal collaborative structure and targeted strategy were put in place. *A Framework for Collaboration* will enable The Arts Council and local authorities to develop a more consistent approach to funding and promoting the arts. Based on key principles of arts development, public engagement and spatial planning, the framework will facilitate The Arts Council and local authorities to set targeted outcomes and foster increased levels of public engagement and participation. A ten-year vision and broad goals set the future direction in order to ensure that the arts are fully integrated 'into the corporate ethos and policy of local government' (The Arts Council & CCMA, 2016).

Being a centenary year for both the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, local authorities throughout the country supported or commissioned a multitude of cultural activities and artefacts throughout the year. County plans for 'Ireland 2016' were drawn up following wide consultation. Local authorities were involved in organising exhibitions, commemorative events, memorial artefacts, and a wide range of book and media projects. In September the

minister organised a meeting with those who were instrumental in planning and hosting the 3,000 local events that had marked the important anniversaries.

Boundary issues

The report of the Athlone Boundary Committee was submitted to the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in November 2016. The committee recommended that there should be no change to the existing boundary, subject to Roscommon and Westmeath County Councils putting in place a new programme of structured cooperation to develop an innovative governance system for Athlone.

A boundary report on Galway was published in October 2016. The committee recommended establishment of a new unified Greater Galway Authority, combining the respective strengths of the two existing authorities in order to maximise the potential of the region. The report will now be considered in the context of the overall review of local government being undertaken in accordance with the *Programme for a Partnership Government*.

The reports of the Carlow, Drogheda and Waterford committees had not been published by the end of 2016. Efforts to address the Cork boundary issue continued during 2016 with establishment of an expert group to review the recommendations in both the majority and minority reports that had been issued in September 2015. The group is charged with identifying and examining a wider range of options than might have been considered previously, and with making recommendations to the minister regarding future arrangements for Cork.

Other developments

NOAC continued to embed itself in the politico-administrative architecture with S.I. No. 536 of 2016 allowing for an increase in the number of members for a period of two years. The commission published eight reports and a commissioned survey during 2016.

Prior to the general election, a *Charter for Rural Ireland* was published. It contains specific commitments to establish frameworks and practices to support the rejuvenation of the rural economy and rural society. The *Programme for a Partnership Government* also articulated the desire for thriving rural as well as urban communities

and there is a strong rural dimension to many of the local economic and community plans referred to earlier.

Over €5 million was made available under the 2016 Rural Economic Development Zones (REDZ) initiative, which was mainstreamed following the 2015 pilot. More than forty projects were assisted by local authorities. A new Town and Village Renewal Scheme was given a €10 million allocation for 2016, enabling local authorities to support the regeneration of 200 towns and villages. €4.5 million was also allocated to support rural recreation infrastructure.

The Dublin Docklands Development Authority was dissolved on 1 March 2016 in accordance with the Dublin Docklands Development Authority (Dissolution) Act, 2015, and Dublin City Council assumed responsibility for the area. An independent Docklands Oversight and Consultative Forum, consisting of a chairperson and twenty-one ordinary members, was established. The forum will advise the city council and its strategic policy committees regarding formulation, development, monitoring and review of the council's policy relating to the docklands area.

The Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government invested €1.6 million in expanding the initiative *My Open Library*, which increased library access for the public. The move to extended opening hours has been welcomed by the public on social media. However, librarians voted decisively against cooperating with the rollout of 'staffless' libraries, with Impact trade union members backing industrial action by a margin of nine to one.

Local authorities continued to respond to Ireland's ageing population by developing 'Age Friendly City and County Programmes'. For example, April saw the launch of the Cork Age Friendly County Strategy, produced by the Cork Age Friendly County Alliance, which brings together members of the Older Persons Council and high-level representatives from key stakeholders in the public, private, health and academic sectors in Cork County.

Steps continued to develop a national planning framework which will link relevant government policies and investment on national and regional development. It was described by the minister as the most important project in his department. A National Planning Framework Advisory Group was established by the department, comprising thirty-five organisations, including relevant NGOs, professional bodies and technical experts. The advisory group brings together representatives from social, sectoral, environmental and business groups to identify the principal policy areas that the embryonic framework should

address. A draft framework for public consultation is expected to be published by February 2017. The framework will influence the future work of local authorities and shape central–local relationships.

Two insightful reports were published in the Institute of Public Administration's 'Local Government' research series during 2016. They outline and assess many of the recent changes in Irish local government structures and processes. *Local and Regional Bodies in Ireland 2012–2016* delineates the changes to the local and regional administrative landscape. *Re-Shaping Local Government* sets developments in Ireland in an international context and details other countries' experiences of reorganisation and reform.

References

- Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. (2016). *2016 Local Property Tax (LPT) allocations to local authorities*. Retrieved from <http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/migrated-files/en/Publications/LocalGovernment/Administration/FileDownload%2C43581%2Cen.pdf> [15 December 2016].
- Government of Ireland. (2016). *A programme for a partnership government*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- LGMA. (2016). *Local government efficiency: Report on the delivery of the recommendations of the local government efficiency review group 2010–2015*. Retrieved from http://www.lgma.ie/sites/default/files/local_government_efficiency_review_recommendations_march_2016.pdf [30 September 2016].
- NOAC. (2016a). *Local government efficiency review reforms* [NOAC Report No. 5]. Retrieved from <http://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/NOAC-LGER-Report.pdf> [7 October 2016].
- NOAC. (2016b). *Local government shared services projects* [NOAC Report no. 6]. Retrieved from <http://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/NOAC-Shared-Services-Report.pdf> [13 December 2016].
- NOAC. (2016c). *Performance indicators in local authorities 2015*. Retrieved from <http://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2015-PI-Report.pdf> [13 December 2016].
- The Arts Council & CCMA. (2016). *A framework for collaboration*. Retrieved from <http://www.artscouncil.ie/uploadedFiles/FrameworkforCollaboration.pdf> [9 January 2017].