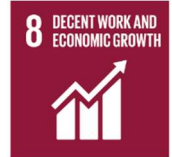




**Chambers
Ireland**
Advancing business together



Local Democracy Taskforce Consultation

Submission by Chambers Ireland

August 2025

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About Chambers Ireland

Chambers Ireland is an all-island business organisation with a unique geographical reach. Our members are the affiliated Chambers of Commerce in the cities and towns throughout the country – active in every constituency. Each of our member Chambers is central to their local business community and all seek to promote thriving local economies that can support sustainable cities and communities.

Priorities of the Chamber Network

The policy priorities of our Network for 2025 are:

1. Competitiveness
2. Housing and Infrastructure
3. Energy and Sustainability
4. Workplace and Skills Development
5. Thriving Towns and Cities

Key Points

Challenges highlighted by the Chamber Network

- Delays in infrastructure are severely impacting the development of urban areas.
- Local authorities remain underutilised and are often constrained from taking a greater role in advancing infrastructure within their areas.
- A lack of early-stage business engagement on policies like development.
- Overall disconnect between strategic plans and practical implementation.
- Access to funding can often be a complicated and unnecessarily drawn-out process.
- Resourcing is an issue for numerous regions.
- Municipal Districts lack authority and require increased funding.

Proposals for Reform

- Devolve greater authority and expand certain reserved functions for LAs to ensure they have the requisite autonomy to carry out their tasks.
- Ensure business representation remains on Strategic Policy Committees, Town Regeneration Committees, and other key bodies.
- Formalise structured, ongoing consultation with affiliated Chambers at town and county level.
- Strengthen Municipal Districts with clear budgets and decision-making powers.
- Ensure alignment between national and local policy to reduce planning conflicts.
- LAs should have greater discretion to apply commercial rate rebates in response to temporary disruptions.
- Grant LAs the authority to ringfence revenue for strategic investment areas such as town centres.
- Pilot 'Place-Based Democracy' with business-led town leadership groups.
- Expand digital tools for local consultation and accountability.
- Ringfence funding for business-led regeneration and skills initiatives.

- Local authorities have significant potential to help rebalance decision-making structures and ensure transparent oversight of critical projects.
- Increase the remit of Municipal Districts to include towns where governance gaps exist.
- Expand NOAC's remit and increase its resources to ensure progress, accountability and transparency.
- Municipal Districts should have their reserved functions expanded to include local area planning, flood risk management, road and traffic management, community development, and housing.
- Clarify roles within councils and SPCs to reduce confusion and overlap.
- Provide a template for SPCs in terms of their roles.
- Increase central funding and enhance fiscal autonomy for LAs.
- Publish standardised annual public impact reports (at Municipal District and Area Committee level) on a national platform to enable comparisons and facilitate accountability.
- Biannual reports focusing on qualitative assessments of service delivery, community impact and innovation should be published by NOAC on the work of each LA.
- A senior Business Liaison Officer should be designated within each LA that is separate from existing Local Enterprise Office and economic development teams.
- The Committee should consider dedicating a Committee focussing on finance and budget topics in every Council and modelled similar to Strategic Policy Committees.

Our Perspective

Reform is essential

It is pertinent to note the most significant attempt at reforming the public service in the history of the State: the Devlin Report¹. The report was a clear opportunity for meaningful reform of our public service which offered a practical blueprint for modernisation. Unfortunately, that opportunity was largely missed and many of the issues experienced today derive directly from that failure to implement reform.

The core recommendations that were designed to improve accountability, streamline decision-making and separate policy from execution could have transformed the State. What followed was piecemeal change and not the structural reform that was required. While a few structural changes were introduced such as the creation of the Department of the Public Service and some advisory bodies, the proposed separation between policy and execution, and the idea of a streamlined ministerial advisory group were largely sidelined.

Now there is an opportunity to learn from the failures of the past and drive meaningful, targeted reform that prioritises delivery. Our submission has been drafted in consultation with our members and is entirely solutions-focussed. We have proposed tangible proposals for reform that are conducive to accountability and delivering efficient public services. We are ready to work with Local Government and relevant stakeholders to ensure that reform is actioned in such a way that is helpful.

¹ Part I of the Devlin report:

<https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/125895/DevlinReportPart1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

The role of affiliated Chambers of Commerce

The unique geographic presence that the affiliated Chamber Network enjoys means they are all well-placed to understand the specific needs and challenges of their localities given the role they play as advocates for businesses who are the lifeblood of economic activity in their communities.

‘Thriving Towns and Cities’ stands as a cornerstone of our policy priorities because the vibrancy of our urban areas is inseparable from the broader economic health and societal wellbeing of our national competitiveness. Our Network plays a pivotal role as advocates for local businesses and helps shape the very heartbeat of urban life through their community engagement.

Chambers also serve as catalysts for collaboration and drive initiatives that not only nurture economic activity but also foster civic pride and cultivate places where people aspire to work, live and invest. Through collaborative partnerships and by engaging with stakeholders at every level, we strive to ensure that towns and cities across Ireland are equipped to meet challenges as they arise. Therefore it is pivotal that business representation remains on Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), Town Regeneration Committees, and other key bodies.

It is essential that there is stronger alignment between strategic infrastructure planning and local business needs. Our Network is solutions-focussed and hence willing to partner with local authorities (LAs) and government to ensure that our towns and cities remain vibrant and economically resilient urban areas throughout Ireland.

We respectfully urge the Taskforce to formally integrate their engagement within local governance frameworks to ensure that policy development and implementation are informed by the practical experience and insights they can provide.

The role of local authorities in infrastructure delivery

Core infrastructure – leading with transport, water and energy – are the defining infrastructural shortcomings of the past 10 years which have had a profound knock-on impact on housing. Local authorities have a critical role to play in bridging that infrastructural gap and central to our

advocacy in this context is the conviction that empowering them will be fundamental to overcoming existing bottlenecks and accelerating progress on critical projects across the country.

We fundamentally believe that decisions should be made as close as possible to the communities they affect. However, local authorities remain underutilised and are often constrained from taking a greater role in advancing infrastructure within their areas. This is why last year we called for greater devolvement to local authorities.²

We view the role of local authorities as central to the successful delivery of infrastructure and progressing the aims of the National Development Plan. They are well-placed to act as key enablers of place-based development to ensure that growth is both sustainable and equitable. LAs also have significant potential to help rebalance decision-making structures and ensure transparent oversight of critical projects; both of which are essential to removing the obstacles that have long hindered progress. Enabling them to do so will help lay the foundations for development and safeguard our competitiveness in all regions of the State for generations to come.

Consistent with our submission regarding the review of the National Development Plan,³ there must be a core understanding at all levels of Government – particularly at the local level – that failing to deliver on our key infrastructure consequently significantly impacts every other critical growth area and halts progress. This is a point we highlighted in our submission, where we recommended that the review should be undertaken in the following terms:

1) Delivery

² <https://chambers.ie/press-releases/chambers-ireland-calls-for-bold-achievable-reforms-to-address-critical-issues-facing-irelands-future-competitiveness-and-quality-of-life/>; [https://chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/29.10.24 Chambers-Ireland General-Election-Manifesto Final.pdf](https://chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/29.10.24%20Chambers-Ireland%20General-Election-Manifesto%20Final.pdf)

³ <https://chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Review-of-the-National-Development-Plan-Submission-by-Chambers-Ireland-June-2025.pdf>

The State's ability to grow sustainably is fundamentally constrained by the continued failure to deliver key infrastructure, including housing and regional connectivity. LAs should be at the forefront of such delivery which is frequently stalled by excessive bureaucracy and red tape. As our population continues to grow, the consistent failure to deliver undermines our ability to meet growing demand as pressure on such infrastructure increases in parallel. LAs have role to play in reversing this trend.

2) Accountability

Accountability is essential to ensure delivery. In the context of local issues, accountability includes ensuring that reviews and approvals of local development plans are expedited without unnecessary delays. Accountability also includes governance and LAs must provide clear leadership and act as central hubs for decision-making in their locality to deliver projects expeditiously that genuinely serve the public interest. The National Oversight and Audit Commission should be granted extra resources and greater remit to ensure accountability across LAs.

Implementing policy

For policy to be coherent, there must be balanced alignment at the local level with national policy. However, LAs frequently face challenges in implementing national policies and driving effective decision-making. This misalignment between local and national priorities creates inefficiencies and limits the potential for them to respond to the unique needs of their communities.

Local interests are sometimes overshadowed by central executive authority which results in confusion around the roles and powers within strategic committees and council structures. A common example that our members have reported as being an issue is that local decisions sometime clashes with national policy and planning permission denials due to conflicting guidelines. Resourcing is also poor in certain areas which further compounds this issue.

Equally important is the fact that many local representatives overestimate the scope of their authority. While they often expect to have significant influence, in reality their role is limited and at times reduced to simply endorsing decisions made by the executive. In addition, Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) frequently lack clear roles and the requisite authority in terms of actioning items and achieving tangible outcomes. In some areas SPCs are hampered by bureaucracy, have limited workflow and therefore fail to function effectively. Consequently local priorities are at a risk of being sidelined. To remedy this, there should be a template for SPCs which adequately defines their roles.

A recurring proposal from our members is for improved capacity, clearer responsibilities and greater autonomy to solve these issues so that local authorities can effectively serve their localities.

Devolution and subsidiarity

Following on from our point regarding devolution, we firmly support the principle of subsidiarity which asserts that functions should be carried out at the most immediate or local level that is consistent with their resolution. This means increasing the range of reserved functions held by LAs and giving serious consideration to devolving further authority over the provision and management of local services.

The capacity of LAs to deliver infrastructure efficiently is intrinsically linked to the authority they are granted. Reserved functions should be expanded along with a meaningful transfer of responsibilities from central government so that LAs can address needs specific to their region.

Additionally, councillors should play a more decisive role in the development and implementation of local authority budgets but only to the extent it ensures progress and that resources are allocated in line with the priorities and aspirations of their constituencies.

Town Councils and Municipal Districts

The effectiveness of town councils across the country has historically varied considerably and many of our members have reported a mixed level of satisfaction with their local councils' performance prior to their abolition. While some town councils acted as meaningful drivers of local development and provided a clear platform for community representation, in many locations their impact was severely limited and entirely inconsistent. Focus should now be on improving any gaps where they exist.

In areas where town councils were effective, their removal meant that a noticeable leadership gap emerged in their communities. This was identified as a factor that has weakened effective decision-making structures and removed the problem-solving capacity that these bodies once provided. In those scenarios it was felt that dedicated town managers should be introduced to address this absence and bring renewed focus to local governance but with the overriding objective of removing bureaucracy rather than adding to it in order to ensure progress.

Many Municipal Districts lack meaningful authority and operate with limited funding. Previously, local urban councils managed dedicated budgets and addressed a broad range of issues effectively but now Municipal Districts must compete for resources from larger county councils. Even in urban centres with substantial populations and significant economic activity, Municipal Districts are often left to focus on minor, highly localised matters due to restricted authority and financial constraints.

Fiscal autonomy

LAs should be granted increased central government funding. There should be enhanced fiscal autonomy to enable them to generate and manage resources effectively and deliver services. Moreover, the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) should report promptly to engage meaningfully with LAs and fortify the transparency and oversight mechanisms that underpin public confidence.

In addition, funding streams like the (URDF) are invaluable for all regions. However the excessive and complex procedures required to access and allocate funding significantly impede efficiency and delay the implementation of essential local projects. To address this, we propose examining efforts to streamline the approval process by introducing a simplified framework for applications. Furthermore Municipal Districts should be set clearly defined budgets and targets that are coupled with regular oversight that allows LAs to respond promptly to community needs while ensuring robust accountability.

Questions

Section A: Structures

1. The elected council sole has responsibility for making certain decisions and exercising powers. These are known as Reserved Functions and primarily relate to policy, financial and governance matters of the local authority. The Taskforce will consider the current decision making role of the Council (reserved powers) and make recommendations for changes to support increased use of existing/new powers.

a) Is there an adequate understanding of the suite of reserved functions/powers among councillors (and the public)?

There is limited public awareness of the role held by councillors and prospective candidates and a comprehensive understanding of their scope is often lacking. Some may not have received adequate training with the consequence being that they may infrequently exercise these powers or feel compelled to align with executive recommendations to maintain constructive working relationships. This dynamic ensures that a status quo remains which may not ensure progress on economic actions or plans within a community and is not conducive to ensuring accountability. To remedy this, we propose that candidates for election receive a summary of what the role entails.

b) What changes would you make to support increased use of those powers?

- Increase awareness among councillors of their reserved authority and how to exercise them effectively.
- Provide access to independent, impartial advice not tied to local authority officials.
- Provide training for candidates.
- Provide a summary of what the role entails (as in 1 a) above).
- Establish an independent research support service similar to the Oireachtas Library & Research Service to inform decision-making.

c) In your view, what further or enhanced powers could/should be delegated to councillors to enable them to carry out their role effectively?

- Councillors should have greater authority over economic priorities, local enterprise supports, tourism, investment and the local application of planning policy – particularly where national frameworks must be adapted, such as balancing housing demand with town centre regeneration where appropriate. This should be examined with the aim of delivering on infrastructure and ensuring progress does not stall.
- Increase councillor representation on key funding bodies (for example LCDCs), where current involvement is minimal and progress is limited.
- Delegate authority to councillors to vary and target commercial rates in line with businesses' financial capacity and introduce or adjust vacant property taxes to address local economic conditions.
- Strengthen councillor authority over planning decisions to ensure they reflect the intent of democratically adopted development plans.

d) Is there an awareness and use of the current range of supports for councillors in the sector?

See above our replies to 1 a) and b).

e) In your view, what further or enhanced supports could/should be provided to councillors in carrying out their reserved functions, e.g. training and development, executive supports, etc?

Provide access to independent advice for councillors. An independent research service should be explored to equip councillors with the necessary knowledge to use their reserved powers appropriately.

2. The Taskforce will consider the role of Municipal Districts (MDs), which are sub-county structures both statutorily and in practice and make recommendations on other powers that could be mandatorily devolved from plenary council level to strengthen the role of MDs

a) What types of activities are carried out at Municipal District level in local authorities which are relevant to the work of your organisation?

Feedback received from members regarding Municipal Districts has been positive. However, their effectiveness could be improved by increasing resources.

b) In your view, what are the i) strengths and ii) weaknesses of Municipal Districts?

Municipal Districts offer several strengths that enhance local governance. Their proximity to communities enables a deeper understanding of local needs which helps to tailor decision-making and make it more responsive. They also provide a platform for balanced regional representation which helps to ensure that diverse voices are heard. Additionally, the small size of Municipal Districts allows for more focussed discussions which facilitates local issues to be addressed in detail.

In terms of weaknesses, even though decision-making can be tailored, Municipal Districts sometimes lack sufficient decision-making powers and are overshadowed by county-level authorities which limits their effectiveness. Furthermore, their strategic remit is generally narrow and they have limited influence over broader policy or funding decisions which can hinder their ability to drive significant change or long-term development.

c) What reserved functions could be executed effectively at Municipal District level that are not at present?

The following functions should be considered for devolvement:

1. Local area planning: Greater responsibility for creating and amending Local Area Plans to reflect specific community needs.
2. Flood risk management: Considering flood maps and schemes locally for more responsive planning.
3. Road and traffic management: Taking roads in charge, implementing traffic calming measures and establishing taxi stands.

4. Community development: Managing community funds, civic honours, local cultural initiatives and progressing town twinning initiatives in conjunction with Chambers of Commerce where appropriate.
5. Housing: Delegating control of housing units in urban areas and adopting anti-social behaviour strategies that are conducive to sustainable planning and vibrant town centres.

d) What would enable Municipal District members to execute reserved powers more effectively at this level?

Direct budgetary control should be allocated to MDs over a defined portion of funding streams such as LEO-style business supports, place-making and streetscape grants and tourism-related initiatives. This would facilitate districts in tailoring investments to local priorities and drive more responsive development.

Additionally, appointing a dedicated executive liaison to each MD would enhance coordination and accountability between elected members and council staff. Increasing the number of council officials specifically focussed on the needs and service delivery within each district would further ensure that local issues are addressed efficiently and with greater attention to community-specific contexts.

Finally, there should be increased awareness of the role Municipal Districts play in their localities.

e) What other new functions could be devolved to municipal district level?

Municipal Districts should have a role to play in terms of funding, specifically in terms of allocating community, festivals, events and arts funding from a pot based on population size of district.

3. **The Taskforce will consider the role and status of existing Area Committees and consider changes including how to place them on the same legislative footing as Municipal**

Districts. Currently, six Local Authorities in urban areas do not have Municipal Districts but have Area Committees.

a) What type of activities are carried out at Area Committee level in local authorities which are relevant to the work of your organisation?

Area Committees provide a forum to discuss the following topics:

- Infrastructure.
- Supports for businesses.
- Urban regeneration.

They also contribute to the development of Local Economic and Community Plans which outline strategic objective for economic and community development over six years. In addition they monitor service delivery and local projects, which can include a range of matters relevant for our Network including business-related infrastructure like roads, public spaces and broadband.

b) In your view, what are the i) strengths and ii) weaknesses of Area Committees?

We consulted the relevant Chambers where Area Committees operate. The lists below provide an assessment drafted in line with common themes.

Strengths:

- Promoting democratic engagement between councillors and communities.
- Providing a level of oversight regarding local service delivery.
- Supporting discussions on local economic development.
- Offering flexibility in structure and operation.

Weaknesses:

- Lack formal statutory powers which limits their influence.

- Vary widely in effectiveness and structure across councils.
- Sometimes duplicates the work of other local governance bodies.
- Often under-resourced in terms of administrative support.
- There is a lack of awareness of the role Area Committees have and efforts should be made to bridge that knowledge gap.

4. The Taskforce will consider the role for a small number of town focussed bodies to be introduced on a phased, regional basis to provide a focal point for raising concerns of large towns and coordinating town-focussed activities.

a) What role could a town-focussed body play in addressing challenges facing towns and villages in urban and rural areas? Where relevant, please give any details of how this might specifically impact on the work of your organisation.

The success and efficiency of town councils varied significantly from location to location. If done correctly, then Municipal Districts could cover towns. In this context it is hence essential that it should not entail reintroducing unnecessary bureaucracy and they should be made accountable for ensuring progress in the area within their remit. Emphasis should be on establishing a lean strategic body that would coordinate input across planning, transport, business supports, and public realm investment to ensure that urban priorities are effectively represented and integrated into county-level decision-making.

Section B: Funding

1. The Taskforce will consider ways for local authorities to increase fiscal autonomy by reviewing existing revenue-raising and debt management options and new/alternative revenue raising powers.

a) Can you outline any ways in which existing revenue raising powers can be changed or improved in order to increase fiscal autonomy? E.g. Local property tax, commercial rates, charges for good and services.

LAs should have greater discretion to apply commercial rate rebates in response to temporary disruptions such as construction works. They should also have the authority to ringfence revenue for strategic investment areas such as town centres which are essential for economic activity and serve as civic hubs for urban areas.

We favour a shift away from labour-based taxation towards more sustainable revenue sources and support reforms that reduce reliance on commercial rates. In our Budget submission for 2026,⁴ we proposed that a land value model of taxation of land should be adopted which is ambivalent to the current use of the property. The current model distorts land use incentives, encourages long-term land banking, and exposes Local Authorities to financial risk by over-concentrating funding in volatile, low-margin retail sectors. This has led to poor planning outcomes, including excessive out-of-town retail development and competition between councils for rates income.

b) Are there ways in which debt management can be changed or improved in order to increase fiscal autonomy?

There should be greater flexibility afforded to LAs to respond to economic downturns by temporarily operating within controlled short-term deficits. This would stimulate economic

⁴ <https://chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/2026-PBS-FINAL.pdf> page 19.

activity and provide targeted support to businesses (such as through the reduction or suspension of commercial rates and public realm usage fees) in a way that is responsive and proportionate.

c) Are there any new or alternative revenue raising powers that you consider would increase fiscal autonomy?

LAs have a role to play in implementing vacant and derelict property and site taxes. To do this they could by appointing dedicated personnel to identify, monitor, and enforce collection.

Consistent with our point in 1 a), we support broader measures to take pressure off commercial rates. The current commercial rates model incentivises inefficient use of land and creates financial risk for Local Authorities by concentrating their funding within the retail sector which is often low margin and subject to significant economic volatility. This has also incentivised bad planning that has resulted in the increased footprint of out of town-centre retail developments and competition between Local Authorities for rates income⁵.

2. The Taskforce will examine ways to ensure that local priorities for central government grant funding are decided upon by the council.

a) Considering any programmes or schemes you are familiar with; can you outline ways in which councillor decision making in relation to local priorities for central government grant funding can be exercised or improved?

- Align funding priorities with national and regional strategic plans. Projects should be prioritised that support objectives in the National Planning Framework, such as compact growth or climate resilience. This would have a positive impact in terms of increasing the likelihood of securing Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) support.
- Use local data and evidence to inform decisions.

⁵ <https://chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/2026-PBS-FINAL.pdf> page 19.

- Engage with businesses, community groups, and residents to identify needs. Mandatory local consultation should take place before applications are submitted to schemes such as URDF, RRDF, and Connected Hubs. Chambers should be proactively engaged at the earliest stage to ensure alignment with local business needs with the aim of making decisions that are appropriate and proportionate to their specific local issues.
- Establish clear, transparent criteria for prioritising projects. A scoring system that evaluates projects based on economic activity and alignment with local development plans would help provide a rationale for prioritisation.
- Provide councillors with training on funding processes and project appraisal.
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of funded projects to guide future decisions.

3. The Taskforce will consider if the timing of financial decisions need to be amended to increase effectiveness and enhance councillor consultation and engagement.

a) Can you outline ways in which councillor consultation and engagement in relation to the following areas can be enhanced?

- Local Property Tax: The timeline for notifying LPT allocations, liability dates, and variation decisions to Revenue Commissioners does not align well with councillors' involvement in the overall budget process. This sequencing limits their ability to make informed decisions.
- Municipal Districts: Members reported that councillors have limited input beyond minor topics. The process where municipal budgets are finalised before county budgets and after LPT decisions is viewed as ineffective in allowing for meaningful input.

b) Have you any other comments or observations you would like to make regarding the timing of financial decisions in relation to:

(i) interaction with your organisation/ member; and (ii) councillor engagement and consultation?

Some members highlighted that councillors ought to be engaged earlier in the budget process. This would enable greater oversight of expenditure. To facilitate same, a dedicated Committee focussing on finance and budget topics could be established in every Council which meets frequently but is modelled similar to Strategic Policy Committees.

Section C: Functions

1. The Taskforce will consider which existing local government functions could be further strengthened and/or powers devolved locally to the elected Council either at plenary or Municipal District level and will explore opportunities to increase reserved functions.

a) Which existing reserved functions, at plenary or Municipal District level, could be further strengthened? How?

LAs are equipped with deep knowledge of their communities' needs and should be enabled to lead housing initiatives and associated infrastructure projects.

They should be equipped with greater autonomy regarding housing construction and retrofitting. There should be a shift from a centrally controlled model where approvals are routed through the Department of Housing and reviewed by DPER which runs the risk of duplicating work. Instead there should be a locally driven approach to eliminate inefficiencies and accelerate delivery.

Accountability can be maintained through rigorous auditing and performance monitoring, rather than burdensome pre-approval processes. This shift will expedite delivery and unlock more responsive housing solutions that are tailored to local contexts while ensuring transparency and appropriate use of public funds.

b) What additional new reserved powers in existing functional areas could be devolved from central government to local government at plenary or Municipal District level?

Some of our members have suggested that local planning authorities should have greater discretion in applying density and design standards to support context-sensitive town-centre regeneration.

c) What new reserved powers in new functional areas could be devolved from central government to local government at plenary or Municipal District level?

There is potential for LAs to play a stronger role in community safety through information-sharing with Gardaí to tackle antisocial behaviour in a more joined-up and responsive way.

Unfortunately the timeframe given for consultation was short and with adequate time, we would be able to provide more input on this matter. Our Network would welcome the opportunity meet with the Committee in due course to discuss this matter.

2. The Taskforce will consider mechanisms for providing for meaningful and timely engagement between the central body (Government Department or Agency) and locally elected representatives.

a) Do you consider the current engagement between central government and local (elected members and/ or Executive) sufficient? What are the i) strengths and ii) weaknesses of the engagement?

Some of our members have reported that their local councillors have limited direct engagement with central government officials and that local government often operates more as an administrative arm of national policy than as an independent tier. This is problematic as it risks leaving councillors to primarily act as go-betweens for constituents navigating a highly-centralised system.

e) In your view, what type of mechanism would facilitate timely and meaningful engagement, particularly in relation to policy development, programme design and service delivery?

Formal involvement of affiliated local Chambers in annual service planning and strategic reviews would ensure that business priorities specific to their areas are reflected in local policies. Designating a senior Business Liaison Officer within each LA that is separate from existing Local

Enterprise Office and economic development teams would strengthen coordination across departments and deepen engagement with local businesses.

Section D: Governance and Accountability

1. The Taskforce will develop proposals to rebalance the power between elected councillors and the executive, including identifying opportunities to better use existing or specify more reserved powers/ functions and mandatory oversight responsibilities for councillors, either at plenary or MD level, particularly in respect of budgetary oversight. It will also explore mechanism to ensure that policy decisions of LA executives are transparent.

a) How could the power between elected councillors and the executive (council staff) be rebalanced?

Key executive decisions such as those involving strategic planning, land, or finance should be subject to approval by a majority of councillors to ensure proper democratic oversight. In addition, independent oversight of executive decisions on strategic planning and asset disposal should be strengthened. However both items should not be arranged in a way that prolongs decision-making inappropriately or to the extent that progress on projects of vital importance is stalled.

b) How could decision making by the executive in Local Authorities be enhanced to be more transparent?

Minutes of management meetings should be published promptly.

c) Are you aware of opportunities for better use of existing powers for councillors?

Councillors should be facilitated to initiate reviews of development plans to ensure democratic accountability. Consistent with our point at 1 a), this should not be facilitated in a way that slows down delivery of key items.

2. The Taskforce will examine how information/data on local service provision can be significantly enhanced to support local decision-making and public awareness of the role and impact of the Council.

- a) *How could the information/data on local service provision be enhanced to support local decision-making?*

Publish annual public impact reports at Municipal District and Area Committee level, using clear infographics to show spending, progress and future plans. Where possible data should be presented in a standardised fashion and published on a national platform to enable comparisons and facilitate accountability.

- b) *Are there specific information/data which you believe would benefit from a particular focus in this regard?*

Consistent with our point in 2a), a list of standardised data that is verifiable, easily-identifiable and comparable should be published. This should be updated every quarter and focus on areas such as housing.

- c) *How could public awareness of the role and impact of the Council be improved?*

Make all relevant data as described in 2 a) and 2b) available to the public.

3. The Taskforce will examine the current role NOAC (the National Oversight and Audit Commission) plays regarding LA oversight and explore options to strengthen its role, particularly in respect of its scrutiny function.

- a) *How could the NOAC be strengthened to enhance its scrutiny of local authorities?*

NOAC should be equipped to meaningfully scrutinise decisions – especially those that are delayed - that impact service quality and functional performance. They should also have a representative present at Council meetings to examine potential or actual shortfalls in delivery. It should be examined whether NOAC should also conduct sample-based audits of departmental activity (for example housing applications) to assess consistency and compliance with procedures.

b) Are there other ways in which the role of NOAC could be strengthened?

Ensuring accountability and progress as identified in 3 a) should be prioritised.

c) How could the transparency of NOAC's work be enhanced?

Biannual reports should be published by NOAC on the work of each LA. It could broaden its remit to include more qualitative assessments of service delivery, community impact and innovation in local governance.

d) How could the timeliness of NOAC's work be enhanced?

Publish biannual reports as specified in 3 c).

e) What steps should be taken to ensure that the recommendations of the Local Government Audit Service and the finding of NOAC are acted upon?

Require LAs to report on its progress in rectifying shortfalls.

5. The Taskforce will explore proposals for initiatives and mechanisms to make the role of Councillor more attractive to a greater number of people from more diverse backgrounds.

a) What steps could be taken to make the role of Councillor more attractive to a greater number of people from more diverse backgrounds?

- Improve supports (e.g. childcare, travel, training).
- Facilitate flexible meeting times and formats to suit varied lifestyles.
- Meetings should be run to a tight, effective agenda.
- Targeted outreach and awareness campaigns in underrepresented communities.
- Facilitate mentorship and leadership programmes for new and diverse candidates.
- Stronger protections against harassment and promotion of respectful political culture.

b) What are the barriers to accessing the role of Councillor for women or people from other diverse backgrounds?

- Lack of supports like childcare or travel allowances.
- Time demands that conflict with work, family, or caring responsibilities.
- Lack of representation and role models from similar backgrounds.
- Limited awareness of the role and how to get involved.
- Cultural and language barriers that hinder participation.
- Fear of harassment or abuse, especially online.
- Accessibility issues for people with disabilities.

Section E: General and Conclusion

(a) What is the nature (e.g., policy development; programme design; service delivery) of your Organisation's interaction with: local authorities; and (b) local councillors

While affiliated local Chambers often initiate local-level activities, both they and Chambers Ireland work in coordination with local authorities. Local affiliated Chambers engage on a range of matters including policy, economic development, town-centre topics, commercial rates, tourism, infrastructure planning, local enterprise promotion. Many Chambers also collaborate with LAs to organise events for their local area.

1. Does your organisation work with:

a) Individual local authorities

Yes. While local affiliated Chambers typically take the lead, both affiliated Chambers and Chambers Ireland work with LAs.

b) Sub-county/city structures (Municipal Districts/Area Committees)

Affiliated Chambers do.

c) National organisations (e.g., AILG, LAMA, CCMA)

Yes. Chambers Ireland works regularly with LAMA and CCMA, including regular meetings with the CCMA's Economic Sub-Committee. We coordinate Business nominees to SPCs nationwide and work with the Department to organise the annual Excellence in Local Government Awards. Our Chief Executive sits on the Age Friendly National Advisory Group and was a member of the Local Government Efficiency Review Group in the past.

2. *Do you have any other suggestions or information that you would like the Taskforce to consider?*

Please refer to our perspective conveyed at the beginning of our submission.