



The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government

**Evolving Governance in Ireland
Role of Councillors at the
Regional Tier of Governance as
Members of the Regional
Assemblies**

**Elaine Lynch
Communications Officer
Association of Irish Local Government (AILG)**



AILG

Association of Irish Local Government
Aontas Rialtas Áitiúil na hÉireann

What we do...

The Association of Irish Local Government

- ❑ AILG is a national body representing the 949 Elected Members of Ireland's 31 Local Authority Councils.
- ❑ Our goal is to represent the collective interests of the Elected Members of the Local Authorities which constitute our membership.
- ❑ As a representative voice of local government in Ireland, the Association aims to;
 - a) to *protect* and support democratic local government
 - b) promote democratic leadership of our Elected Councillors and our Elected Councils
 - c) to promote the welfare and good government of the people of Ireland
- ❑ Training & Education, Research, Policy Development & Advocacy, Representative & Networking



Advocate



Support



Promote

The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government

AILG/Maynooth MU Research Report

Evolving Role of the City/County Councillor



The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government

Research Commissioned by the Association of Irish Local Government

December 2023



Purpose of the Research

Building on the Moorhead Report the research centres on the role of the Councillor

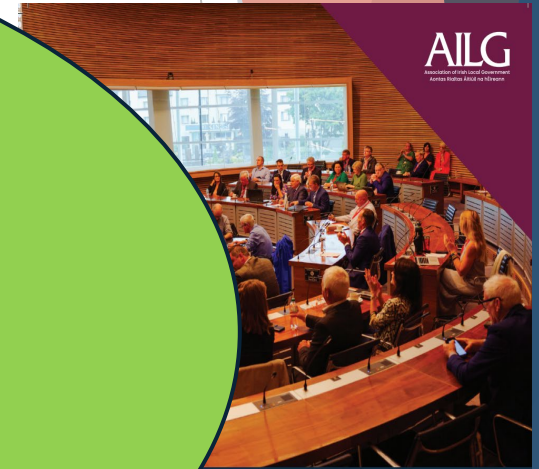
Focus on the

Methodology - Voice of the Councillor

Elected
Councillors
to
in
cons.
local

Promote and profile the contribution and value of the local government sector in our society and the important role that the Elected Members play

Public awareness campaigns with the wider public on the role of the Councillor



AILG
Association of Irish Local Government
An tAonán Aird na Sliocht

21st Century Councillor in
Irish Local Government

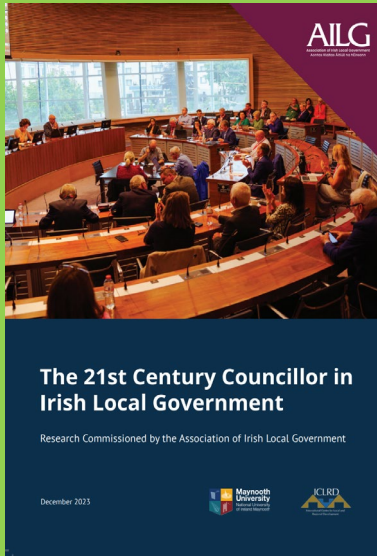
Association of Irish Local Government





Findings from the Research

Perceptions of the Councillors' Role



Very much intertwined with the role of local government

Multiplicity and very busy, but diminished

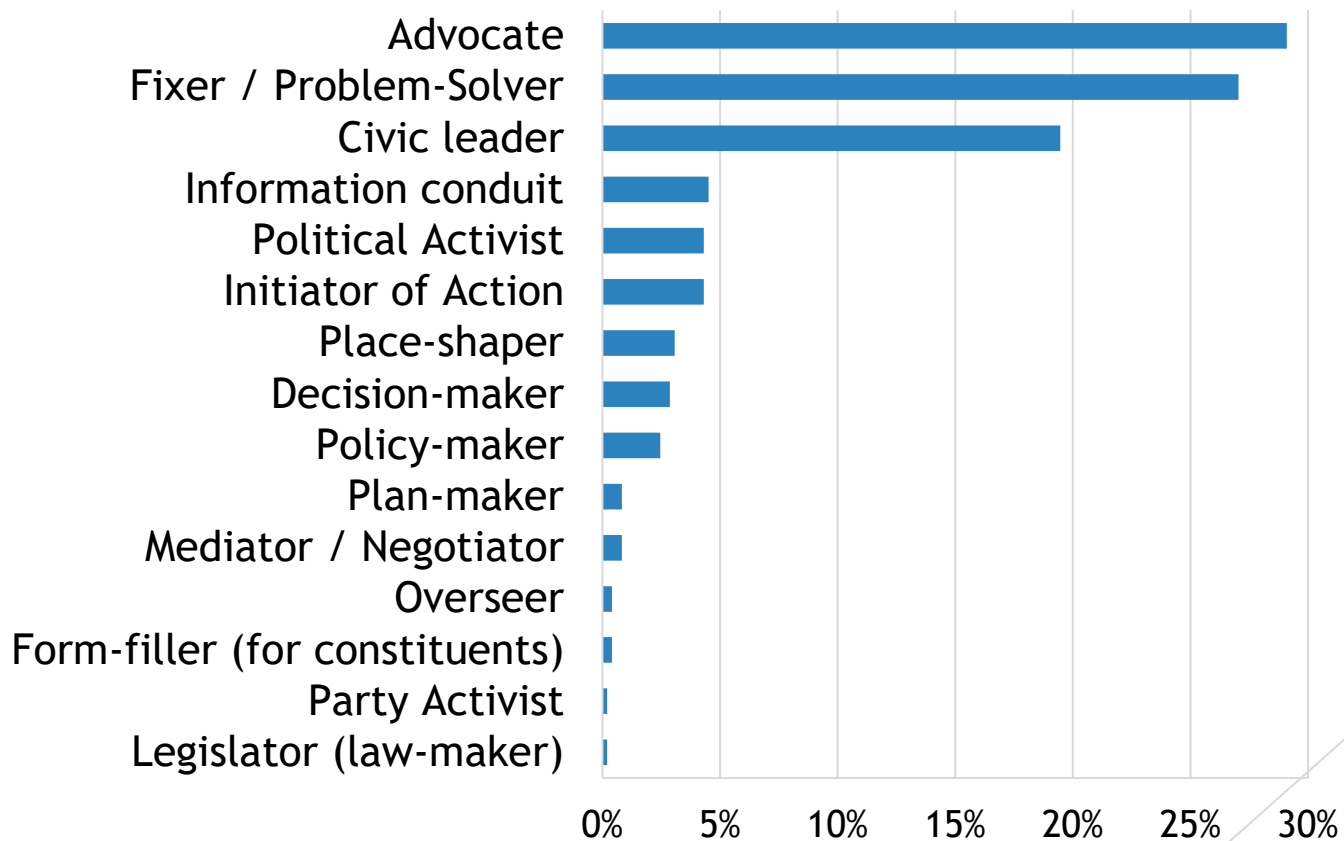
Part-time role requiring full-time commitment

Enjoyable and rewarding

Community oriented, Civic leadership – importance of representational role (in addition to statutory)

Need to increase public awareness and expectations

Roles Which Councillors Feel Best Describe Them



AILG
Association of Irish Local Government

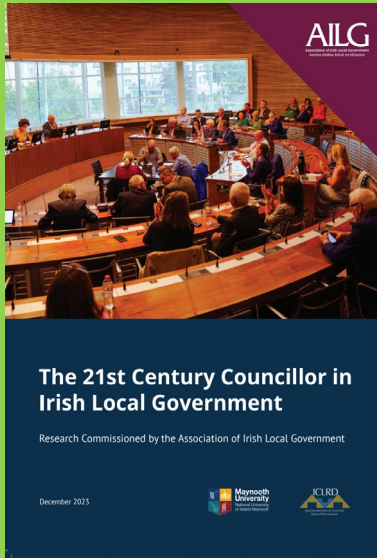
The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government

Research Commissioned by the Association of Irish Local Government

December 2023



Challenges facing Councillors



Erosion of power and of the local government system

Work-life balance

Gender, Youth and Diversity

Recruitment and Retention

Abuse and Harassment

The Council as a workplace

Increasing legal complexities – where to get advice?

What Councillors Say - Challenges

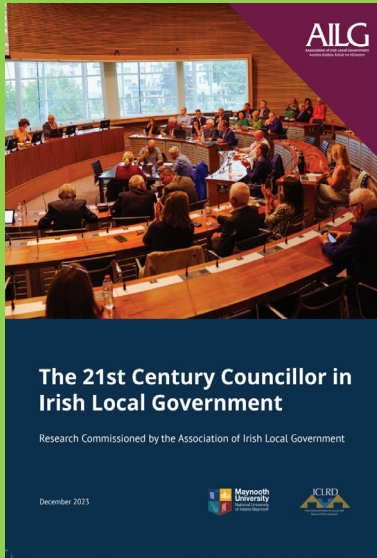
“The role of the Councillor is being increasingly undermined by central government policy, which dictates to local authorities on how and when services are delivered.”

“The public do not understand the actual role of a councillor, because many longstanding councillors are performing roles that are not part of the job. This leads to a lot of work on my part in managing expectations.”

“I think there's still an 'old-boys-club' culture in Ireland, which makes it very hard for more diverse candidates to get mentorship, encouragement and support.”

“You know, the role is amazing... I think it would be important for the government to take another look at the designation of the role as part time and to reflect the realities of what the role is...”

Implications of Reforms and Reconfigurations



Low levels of support for the 2014 legislation

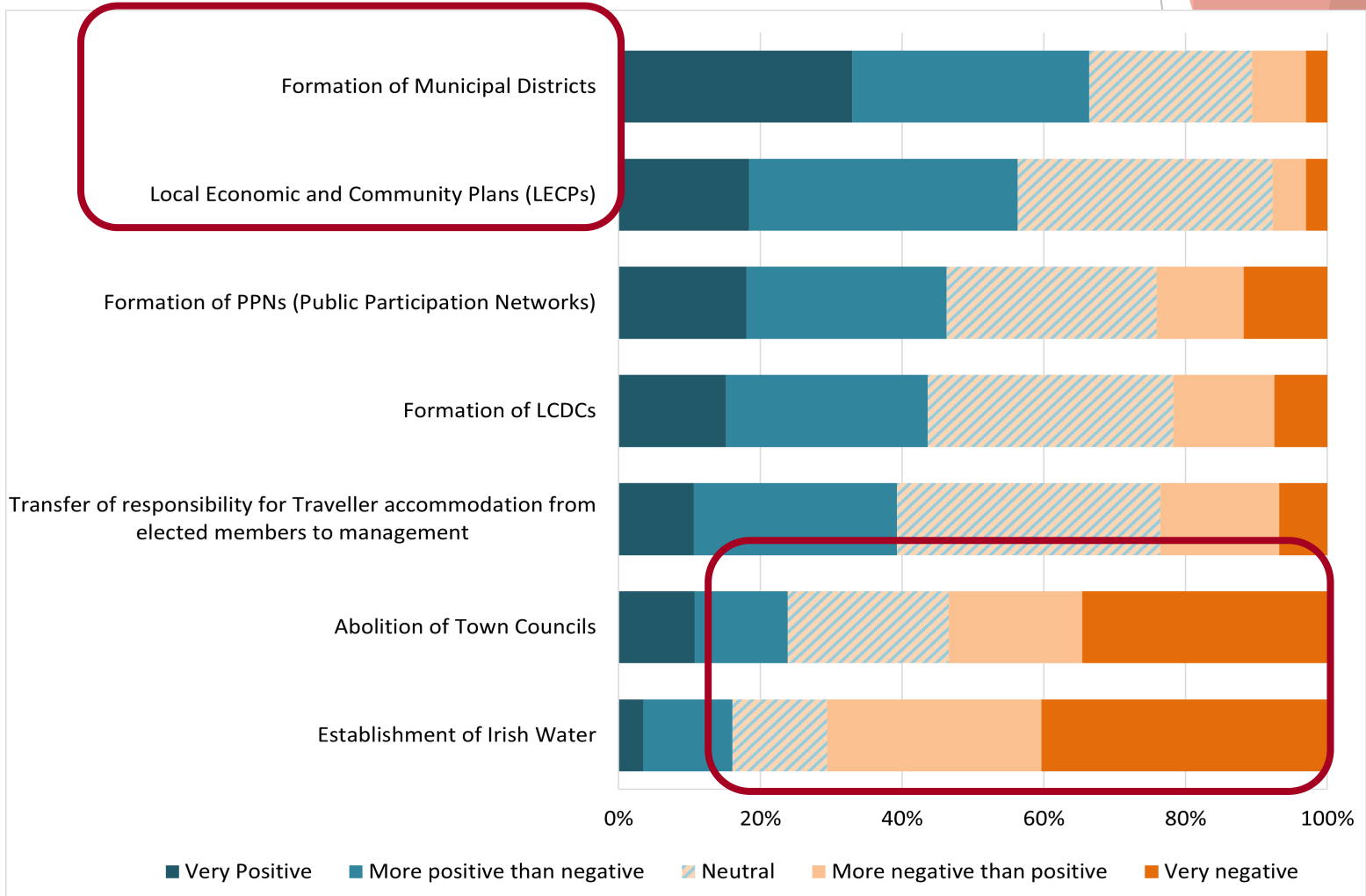
Concerns about Uisce Éireann, OPR and Town Councils

Optimism about MDs and their potential

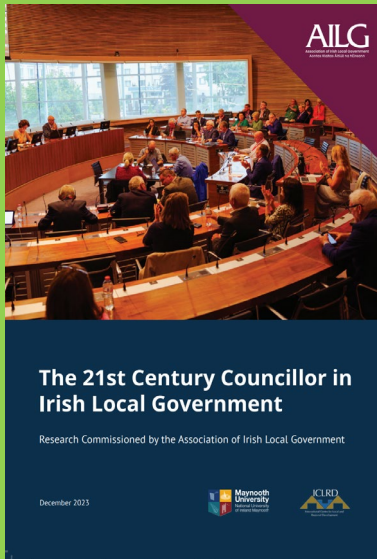
Mixed views of participatory democracy

Positive attitude to role and work of regional assemblies

Perceptions of Specific Reforms and Reconfigurations



Role at Regional Level – What the Members Said



Efficiency of Regional Assembly Meetings

Consensus that been a member of the regional assembly, considering regional and national policy, is an advantage

Assembly Members take a more holistic and broader view of implications of what is being proposed, particularly in respect of planning policy.

Imbalance between rural and urban/city-based Councillors nominated to sit on the Regional Assemblies

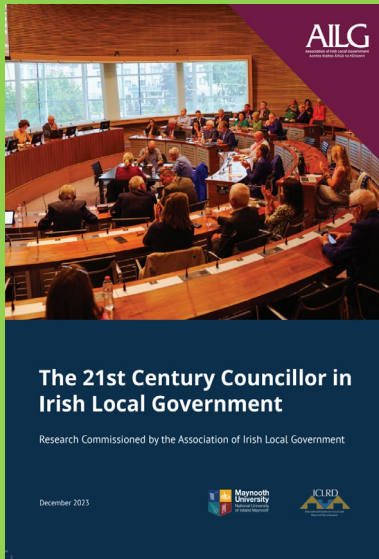
What Councillors Say

“Because it's kind of a different footing... it's more progressive, ...more work like, and it's not as political as what you would say your own local authority is. You're pulling for one region... there is no political grandstanding like you get in the, your local authority, like it's all about scoring points that, you know... a lot of people grandstand and cause controversy”

“The only reason we have regional assemblies is to comply with the European Union. If we compare what we have, the comparison between that and a regional assembly in Austria is that they So, legislative, legislation making powers in Austria at a regional assembly level. I mean, at local government' or regional assembly level here, we really only have consultation powers. It's not much more than that. So, it's watered down”

“I think smaller units would give a better opportunity to focus...; that you'd have councillors both at a very local level, and then you'd have them kind of, you know, focusing at the regional level, and more involved in policy”

Role at Regional Level – Enhancing the Regional Tier of Decision Making



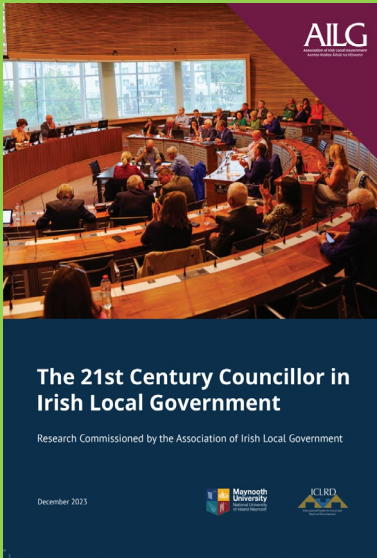
Unlike in most of Europe, Ireland's regional tier of government is not directly elected and therefore the work and remit of our regional assemblies are not widely known or discussed in public fora

Councillors recognise the merits of having regional-level perspectives on spatial planning and wider sustainable development agendas

External interviewees noted that Councillors provide a useful link between local and regional tiers and they make important contributions to decision-making at the regional level.

External interviewees noted, however, that councillors “understand their responsibilities from a legislative policy-making perspective, but don't initiate that policy agenda”

Role at Regional Level – Enhancing the Regional Tier of Decision Making



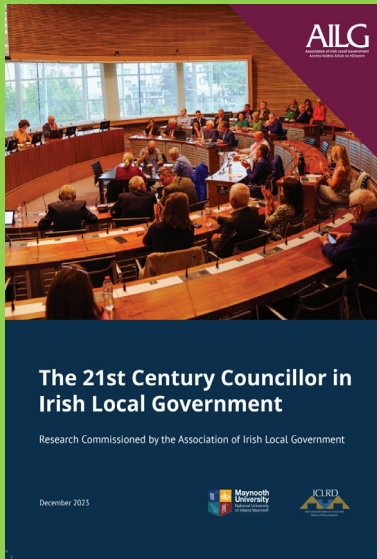
Noted that regional assemblies can provide a platform in which councillors can discuss policy issues, including in respect of functions that have been lost at local government.

There is also a need to ensure that those who have the strongest policy backgrounds, competencies and interests are, under the current appointments system, nominated on to the regional assemblies.

Need to ensure city councillors can feed more systematically into regional planning, particularly given the role envisaged for second-tier cities under the National Planning Framework (NPF).

RA members should be elected directly by the citizens. This would also make regional government in Ireland more similar to the regional level in other European countries

Possible Innovations for Local & Regional Government



Strong support for family-friendly practices

A need for greater diversity, especially gender and ethnicity

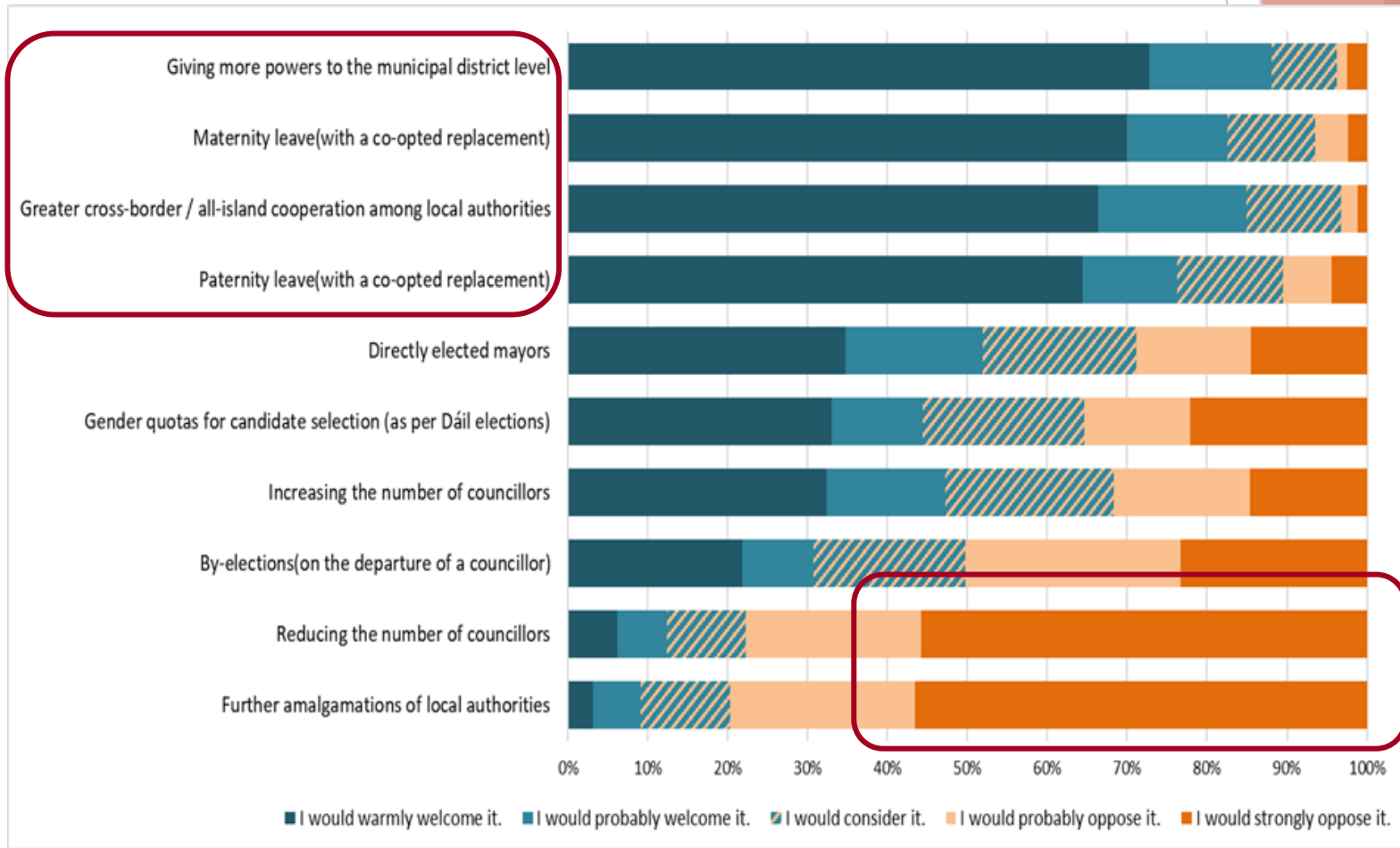
Desire for more Europeanisation - representation, powers, functions & resourcing

Role for DEMs

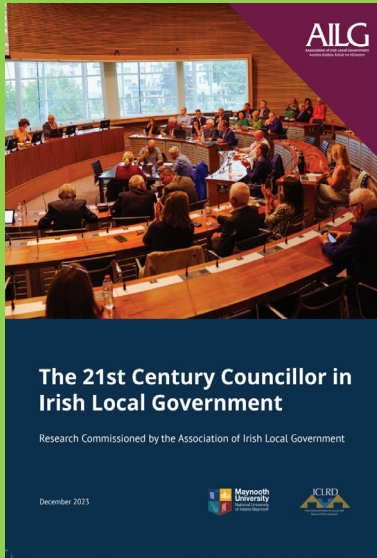
Greater focus on CPD

Directly elected regional tier

Perceptions of Possible Innovations and/or Reforms



Tools, Skills and Capacity-Building



Value of training and CPD, especially in relation to planning and policy

Need for an independent legal and technical advice resource - AILG

Professional well-being

Enforcement of workplace rights and best practices

Big commitment (for a part-time role)

What Councillors Say

“Give Councillors a lot more powers and responsibilities, the kind of powers and responsibilities that local representatives have in most other western countries.”

“To encourage more women to run for politics there needs to be a lot of changes: maternity leave, carers leave & more sociable hours for meetings etc. Women need to be encouraged & supported to go into politics.”

“I do think it should be a full-time role and treated as a full-time role and remunerated accordingly. And I think you might have more young people, more women, might avail of the role rather than the old, retired businessman.”

“I’d like to see municipal districts with some more teeth, more power, but I’d like to see the county council have more power and to be more, for want of a better word, local legislators”

Recommendations

- Enhance this fundamental (local & regional) element of democracy – statutory and representational roles
- Ensure the work councillors do at the regional level is more widely understood and appreciated.
- Importance of training and CPD;
- Access to independent expertise and advice;
- Recognise the full-time nature of the role;
- Ensure more equality and diversity;
- Enable more collaborative working, including between local & regional levels;
- Promote knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the role – national awareness campaign.
- Directly elected regional tier of government

Evolving Role of the Elected Member

Final thoughts!!!!!!

- ❖ Rewarding but the role is demanding,
- ❖ Strive to attain a decent work-life balance
- ❖ Diminishing powers – opportunity to redress this with AILG
- ❖ With powers comes responsibility – Individual need vs common/community good
- ❖ Local vs National issues
- ❖ Balance between statutory vs representative role – statutory/oversight role will determine if more powers are devolved while the representative role may determine our member(s) future re-election.
- ❖ Promotion of the importance of both local and regional government

Democracy is
based upon the
conviction that there
are extraordinary
possibilities in
ordinary people.

✧

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK