



# Local Government Manifesto 2019

# Chambers Ireland

Chambers Ireland is a network of businesses with a geographic reach and a membership which spans across Local Authorities, cities and towns throughout Ireland. Our member chambers represent a wide cross-section of industries and activities, stretching from individual sole traders right through to large multinational companies. With our national presence, our Chamber members are drawn from the pool of those who make up the real economy of Ireland.

## The Irish Business Environment

Ireland is home to a dynamic and innovative cross-section of large multinational companies who create employment and drive economies, not only in the cities, but throughout the regions. However, the Irish economy, like many of our EU counterparts is also made up of a large cohort of SMEs. With almost 250,000 small businesses in Ireland, the small business sector is the beating heart of the Irish economy. Over 720,000 people are dependent on small businesses for their livelihoods. Businesses with fewer than 50 employees create work for more people in Ireland than any other sector, including the State.

While the economy has broadly recovered from recession, the small business ecosystem has not been able to rebound to the same extent that large business has. Medium and large companies are now returning to the same level of employment as in 2008, but the small business sector is still 20% below peak levels of employment. Real economic recovery is dependent on a strong and diverse population of businesses thriving in a healthy economic environment. When a region, or a locality, is too dependent on a single large employer or industry then events far from Ireland can have a disproportionate impact on local areas.

Local Authorities have a major role to play in supporting and encouraging thriving local economies through creating vibrant cities and towns and communities by introducing smarter planning and through nurturing growth.



# Encouraging a Green Energy Economy

The lifetime costs of housing estates and once-off builds are already very high. With carbon taxes due to increase significantly each year between now and 2030, the costs of heating and transport will make low density houses built amid suburban sprawl significantly less affordable.

This creates a huge opportunity for those in rural areas to shift their productive focus from traditional agri-food sectors towards new innovative industries that will emerge in order to satisfy the energy demands of our decarbonising economy. Our rural communities will be able to invest in the creation and supply of renewable electricity through solar, wind, and biomass technologies that will allow people to secure employment in a sector which will grow for generations.

Our Local Authorities need to guide and facilitate the development of local energy economies so that these much-needed developments occur, and to facilitate that they need to ensure that the benefits of these windfall opportunities are felt throughout the community.

## **Chambers Ireland calls for smart and sustainable development and calls on candidates for Local Government to consider the following:**

- Promote clean energy production as a source of revenue for supporting and sustaining rural and regional communities.
- Ensure that communities who are affected by renewable energy generation sites directly benefit from the production of clean energy through facilitating the creation of Local Renewable Energy Trusts.
- Invest in green energy and enterprise training in rural and regional areas to help people supplement their agri-food income.



# Thriving Local Economies

Different regions in the country face different economic challenges and Local Authorities are typically the most appropriate level of government to tackle many of these problems. Through elected officials, Local Authorities can identify the specific issues and threats which affect their local area and take action accordingly. However, there can be wide variations in the effectiveness of policies that generate revenue and support local economic development.

Frequently, Local Authorities in our urban areas have too narrow a tax base. These councils need to reduce their over-reliance on sources of Local Government funds like business rates and development levies, which vary over the economic cycle. Councils should rebalance them with more stable sources of income, such as local property taxes which is underutilised at present and in some instances, can be as low as 3% of their total revenue.

Meanwhile, our rural and regional economies need to develop healthy business ecologies, if they are to reduce the social and economic inequality which is often felt outside urban centres. Local Authorities play a vital role in building the economic infrastructure that will support the SME and entrepreneurial sectors as they venture into new industries and markets, so that they can create new jobs in their areas.

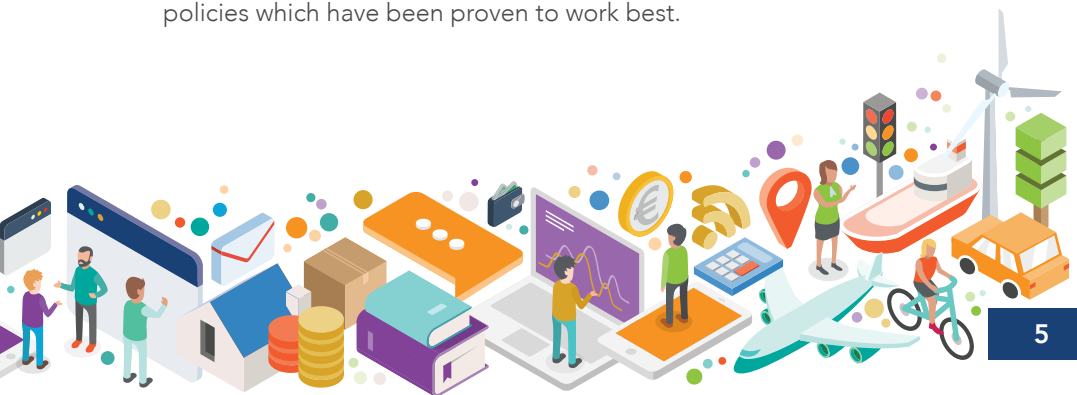
All Local Authorities need to look towards best practice in local government, both here in Ireland and in other jurisdictions, and incorporate these policies into their local practices. Further, Local Authorities need to work with EU organisations to maximise the opportunities which are available to us through our EU membership. Every programme initiated by our Local Authorities should be integrated into the relevant EU funding streams where “funding follows policy” - unless the policy is right the EU funding can’t be unlocked

When it comes to procurement, Local Authorities should consider the inclusion of criteria such as quality, and overall lifetime cost as part of their procurement process. Local businesses that are fixed in the fabric of the local economy are far better placed to deliver contracts in a more sustainable way, which contributes to local employment, compared to larger companies that can deliver the lowest short-term cost but may not always offer the best long-term value.



**Chambers Ireland calls for better balanced local economies and calls on candidates for Local Government to consider the following:**

- Use the 2014 EU Public Procurement Directive to create smarter, better procurement policies that let Local Authorities better judge the merits of tenders.
- Create more stable revenue models in urban areas by ending the over reliance on business rates and increasing the proportion of the Local Authority income that comes from local property taxes (LPT).
- Councils that run large budget surpluses should consider investing that excess in the local economy or reducing the rates burden on business in those areas.
- Create local supports for upskilling and retraining women who have left the workplace because of caring responsibilities.
- Provide serviced office space and hot desks in towns where there is broadband to facilitate flexible working from outside the cities.
- Integrate Local Economic and Community Plans into existing EU policy and programmes to ensure that they qualify for EU funding.
- Participate in programmes like URBACT to ensure that the development of our towns and cities models those policies which have been proven to work best.



# Vibrant Cities and Towns

If Ireland is to become a more urban society, the way we build and plan our urban environment needs a revolution. Our cities and towns need a prolonged and intensive campaign to build more and better pedestrian, cycling, and social infrastructure throughout the urban built environment which integrates housing, transport hubs, and civic spaces (including schools and recreational amenities).

High-density housing is the most sustainable form of development and should be prioritised in areas where there are existing transport links, social services, and economic activity. We need Local Authorities to lead the way by supporting the development of appropriate housing on underutilised brownfield and vacant sites in urban areas across the country. Local Government should review how development levies could be used to incentivise construction in town centre, brownfield, and infill locations.

On greenfield sites, and where new transport infrastructure is planned, we need Local Area Plans that require our developments to be walkable so that local schools, retail, and public transport are all accessible through safe pedestrian networks which will ensure that these neighbourhoods remain liveable throughout people's lives.

Where new strategic housing developments are being built, public transport corridors must be integrated into the plans from the initial stages and must to be planned in conjunction with local pedestrian, cycling, and recreational needs.

With a fifth of our national carbon emissions coming from transport, and given the wide variety of available technologies, this sector can see Ireland quickly achieve significant CO2 reductions. Public transport, cycling, and electric vehicles all have roles to play in helping our economy to decarbonise, while simultaneously improving individual quality of life.



**Chambers Ireland calls for better balanced local economies and calls on candidates for Local Government to consider the following:**

- Require road usage plans to prioritise public transport.
- Implement a widespread and accessible charging infrastructure for electric vehicles to accelerate the decarbonisation of our economy.
- Invest in the public realm though building urban social and community resources modelled on those available in rural areas.
- Ensure that our Local Area Plans include the building of the segregated cycleways that are needed to link our residential areas with our civic and economic centres.
- Traffic infrastructure needs to support, and be responsive to, the introduction of new forms of transport such as eScooters and integrating them with upgraded cycling infrastructure.
- Broaden the coverage and density of shared use schemes such as the City Bikes in the cities where they are available and expanding of them to other towns where they are not.
- Offer grant aid for the owners of commercial premises for the provision of secure facilities for storing their employees' bicycles and e-vehicles.



# Smarter Planning

With the urbanisation planned under Ireland 2040 Local Authorities will have to work with both existing and new communities to ensure that those who are to live in these new neighbourhoods will be genuinely invested in them. This will require deep civic engagement in the decision-making process, and genuine outreach to the community beyond what is merely necessary to comply with statutory requirements. This is important throughout the levels of schemes and planning from the local Area Plans, through the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans, to the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies.

Since the 2014 elections much of the power around planning decisions has moved from the Local Authorities. Local Area Plans were amended by Ministerial Guidelines. Applications for large developments can now be fast tracked through An Bord Pleanála. The Planning Regulator is now able to review and return Local Area Plans which deviate from the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies. Further these regional strategies must be coherent with the National Development Plan. The challenge for the incoming members of the Local Authorities will be to integrate the restrictions of the Regional Strategies with the desires of the local communities or we will not create the kind of cities and towns we need for Ireland. And if Local Authorities are to avail of European financial supports, these plans will have to map on to European policy areas too.

To facilitate the scale of development required to address our social and economic problems, Local Authorities need to further develop and resource their planning teams to guarantee that there is consistency in both decision-making and workforce across each of the three regions, and over the years it takes for developments to be built. Local Authorities must come together at the regional level to share planning services so that it is co-ordinated effectively across Local Authorities.

Uncertainty in regulations stops or delays development from happening. Variable development levies and contributions have similar effects, stalling developments which may otherwise have occurred, so these levies and contributions need to become consistent and coherent across time. Their purpose should be transformed from raising revenue to incentivising developments which lead to the most appropriate housing being built in the most appropriate locations.



In respect of developments, levy payments should be made on a phased basis throughout the development process. Charges should be weighted in line with the density of the dwellings that are built. Where phases are of different densities and the initial phases are predominantly of lower density, then development levies for the first phases should be very high, with reimbursements being made upon completion of the later higher-density phases.

**Chambers Ireland calls for smart and sustainable development and calls on candidates for Local Government to consider the following:**

- Strengthen and resource the planning professionals in the Local Authorities.
- Create consistent policies around development levies and charges. For example, using rebates of levies and charges to ensure completion of high-density developments.
- Shape Local Area Plans in the context of the National Development Plan 2018-2027 so that they can be used to guide Strategic Housing Developments put to An Bord Pleanála.



# Nurturing Growth

Local Authorities need to work with local industry to better support those who are starting new businesses. The participation rate for women in the Irish workforce is lower than the EU average despite Irish women being among the most educated in Europe. Ireland needs to work hard to prevent women slipping from the workforce, and to provide support and encouragement for those who seek to return. The network of Local Enterprise Offices have a critical role to play in this.

Each Local Enterprise Office must develop a local strategy for reaching out to women who have left the workforce, creating a census of both their under-utilised skills and their skills deficits, then follow it up by creating tailored training schemes which respond to the needs of their local area.

We know that the burden of childcare and caring responsibilities falls disproportionately on women in Ireland. Policy decisions at all levels of government must be co-ordinated to ensure that the needed change in culture occurs.

Separately, the SME sector in Ireland is inefficient compared to our international competition. While Ireland overall has a relatively high productivity level, much of this is concentrated in the activities of a few large multinationals. In other industries, and particularly in non-exporting sectors, we lag behind our peers. This inefficiency raises overall business costs and restricts our chances of growing through trading abroad.

Our Local Authorities need to identify the industries which are key to their local economy and work with those who are already in that space to identify the skills shortages that their sectors needs.



For our exporting sectors, international political developments like Brexit, and trade tensions between the EU and US have highlighted the weakness on being too economically focused on a narrow range of industries or markets. Local Enterprise Offices need to work with local business leaders to identify what supports need to be put in place to encourage exports to new markets.

**Chambers Ireland calls for strategic support for enterprise and calls on candidates for Local Government to consider the following:**

- Expand female focused enterprise training strategies.
- Create local skills censuses and develop complementary training programmes which address local skill gaps.
- Expand management training for SMEs.
- Implement a programme of export training for SMEs



# Some critical questions to ask your local candidates

- How will they support the decarbonisation of our economy locally?
- What will they do to support the retention of more women in the workplace?
- How will they improve their local government's budget?
- Which of their policies has the best chance of attracting EU funding to the area?
- How will they ensure better value for money in your Local Authority's procurement process?
- How will the National Development Plan impact on your local area?



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