



GUIDE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Our local authorities – City and County Councils – are our most accessible form of democratically elected government.

They are most useful for identifying local concerns and solving community problems.

This guide outlines how Irish local government works, and how groups and individuals can play their part in these democratic structures.

CONTENTS

1. What it is	1
2. How it works	6
3. Do-it-yourself	12
4. People's stories	15
5. Resources	16

WHAT IT IS

How local government operates

Local government in Ireland operates through a network of local authorities – city and county councils. Councils make policies and provide services to people in their local communities. They maintain local roads and parks, manage local planning and land development, and provide social housing, community, arts and sports facilities.

There are 31 local authorities. They comprise:

- 26 County Councils responsible for local government in 24 geographical counties. These include the three councils in county Dublin – South Dublin, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and Fingal.
- 2 City and County Councils – Limerick City and County Council, and Waterford City and County Council.
- 3 City Councils – in Dublin, Cork and Galway.

You can [find your local authority's details](#) on the Local Government Management Agency website.

The role of elected councillors

The public face of our councils are the councillors who are elected at local elections held every five years. The number of councillors per council is based loosely on the size of the population in each local authority area.

The local authorities with the smallest populations – Carlow, Leitrim and Longford County Councils – have 18 councillors each. Dublin City Council, as the local authority with the largest population, has 63 councillors.

The elected council is in law the policy-making arm of the local authority – councillors have the role of creating the overall policy framework that the council's staff work within.

A significant role of councillors is to represent the views of their communities. They identify and track local problems or issues and bring proposals to officials.

Councillors receive a salary-type payment and allowances.

Council mayors

Each council is led by a Mayor (historically called the Cathaoirleach or Chair), who is elected from among the councillors for a one-year term. This position is largely an honorary one. Mayors are responsible for chairing council meetings and representing the council at local events.

The role of appointed officials

Day-to-day oversight of the work of a council is carried out by a professional (unelected, that is appointed) Chief Executive, and a team of officials. Chief Executives were formerly known as City or County Managers.

A Chief Executive's team includes:

- Directors of Service, who head up council departments which are responsible for key local services. These include land planning, housing, economic, community, and environmental issues.
- Senior and Senior Executive / Technical Officers, who are the management tier below Directors of Service. They oversee a council's day-to-day work.

Services councils deliver

Our county and city councils provide a range of public services and make and enforce local rules, called bye-laws.

Bye-laws are typically used to regulate issues to do with parking, parks, beaches and environment. Here are the services that councils deliver:

- **Land-use planning and consideration of planning applications:** Each local authority is the planning authority for its geographical area. Councils have the power to grant or refuse planning applications for any new house, shop, factory or office.

All planning in a City or County Council area must be carried out in accordance with its City/County Development Plan, which is renewed every six years. These plans establish how land in the local authority area can be used and developed. Development Plans must have regard to the parameters of Regional Planning Guidelines.

- **Social housing and home adaptation grants:** Local authorities provide and maintain social housing for people on low incomes or with particular needs. Councils also administer home adaptation grants for people who need to modify their homes to cope with a disability.
- **Regional and local roads including footpaths and street lighting:** Local authorities maintain regional and local (but not national) roads in their areas and ensure that streets are adequately lit.
- **Environmental protection including air, noise, water and waste:** Councils monitor the quality of the environment. They do this through regular testing, which ensures that pollution does not occur or is tackled where it does. This environmental work also includes responsibility for the upkeep of graveyards and for handling stray dogs and horses.

You can report issues to your local council, including graffiti, road defects, issues with street lighting, through the portal [fixyourstreet.ie](https://www.fixyourstreet.ie) which is run by Dublin County Council on behalf of all local authorities.

- **Fire services (and beach guards):** The fire services for local authority areas are provided through councils. They also supply beach guards during the summer months.

- **Arts, sports, community development:** Buildings and infrastructure such as libraries, parks, and some arts and recreation facilities are built and managed by councils. Activities and programmes are supported in the areas of the arts, community and sports development.
- **Local enterprise support:** Local authorities licence the use of public spaces for street traders. They also provide advice and funding to small businesses. These supports are carried out through Local Enterprise Offices which were formerly known as Enterprise Boards.
- **Motor taxation:** Councils administer motor taxes. Our car registration system is based on the city/county system of digits, for example: MO for Mayo; C for Cork city and county; and LS for Laois.



The Local Authority Development Plan

Every six years each local authority must adopt a new Development Plan. The plan is the guiding document against which council planners make decisions on planning applications.

The Development Plan indicates in a very general way where future types of construction or development is allowed for the coming six years. For example, a Development Plan will earmark specific sites or land in a council area for industrial development, housing or schools. This is called zoning.

Development Plans also contain rules about the general style, density, height, number and mix of building types in any future developments, such as the number of houses that can be built in a given plot.

Stages in local development planning

Draft Development Plans are drawn up by council planners, who are specialist officials. The plans take shape following consultations with councillors, residents and other local interested parties.

The final stage is for a draft Development Plan to be voted on at a council meeting. Councillors can put down a wide range of motions proposing alternative zonings or priorities, or opposing some of those proposed by the planners. These motion are voted on and the outcome of those votes form the Plan for the following six years.

Once a Development Plan is adopted, councillors have no further responsibility for planning matters – responsibility for processing individual planning applications rests with officials.

Information on land zonings in all Development Plans is available on the website www.myplan.ie

Variations in types of council services

While all city and county councils are responsible for the local services outlined here, exactly how the services are provided and delivered differs from council to council. This depends on a variety of factors, including whether the council is urban or rural.

For example, rural councils generally do not provide as many sports pitches as their urban counterparts. This is because there is often no shortage of green space available in the countryside.

Over recent years some key services which councils used to provide have either been privatised or centralised. For example, bin collection services have been contracted/licenced out to private companies in all 31 council areas. The local authorities are still responsible for ensuring that the services are provided and that they meet environmental and health standards.

Starting in 2014, a state utility company, [Irish Water](#), took over from local authorities in providing water to households and businesses, and also in treating wastewater.



Councils' limited responsibilities

Local authorities in most European countries are responsible for all of the functions that Irish councils deliver, and much more besides.

European local authorities routinely play a key role in delivering many important public services, like schools, health services, policing and social services.

For example, in France local authorities manage school enrolments, some aspects of policing, social protection offices and local bus services.

In Ireland, local government's main role is to administer what is decided upon by national government.

How local government is funded

Councils are funded in two main ways – through grants from central government and income or revenue from local taxes and charges. These include planning permission levies and fees, various licences, and charges for on-street parking.

Local property tax

The introduction of Local Property Tax on houses in 2013 means that most councils are less dependent on grants from central government than they used to be.

A total of 80 percent of the Local Property Tax income collected by each council remains with the council, to be spent in its area.

The remaining 20 per cent goes into a central government 'pool' for re-distribution by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, which has overall responsibility for the operation of local authorities.

The aim of this redistribution is to ensure that rural councils, which have fewer and often lower valued houses and therefore less property tax income, have enough funding to deliver their services.

Councillors have been given specific powers to vary the rate for Local Property Tax charged to residents in their area, within certain fixed limits.

Secondary representation – councillors and local committees

Elected councillors are nominated to a range of other local committees, authorities and partnerships outside of their councils' direct remit. These include Education and Training Boards, Schools' Boards of Management, Joint Policing Committees, Local Sports Partnerships and Drugs Task Forces.

This array of bodies are independent of councils and their business is not normally discussed at council meetings.

This has been described as a form of 'secondary representation' because councillors take part in these activities as an extension of their primary electoral mandate with the local authority.

Regional Assemblies

Since 2015, Ireland has three Regional Assemblies covering the regions:

- Eastern and Midland
- Northern and Western
- Southern

One of the main functions of Regional Assemblies is to formulate a Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for their region every six years. These strategies exist to guide local authorities in their economic and spatial planning.

There are no direct elections to Regional Assemblies. Their members are councillors who are nominated from the Councils in the region. They also have a small staff, including a director.

The Regional Assemblies replace what were previously eight Regional Authorities and two Regional Assemblies.

HOW IT WORKS

How councils make decisions

The section of the guide outlines how councils work and how they make key decisions in relation to their Budgets and local development.

It also includes information on the key committees and consultative bodies that develop advice and offer recommendations to elected councillors and council officials.

Some of these structures were introduced as part of a set of legal reforms of local government contained in the Local Government Reform Act 2014. These reforms changed how councils operate, engage with local communities, and plan for economic and community development.

Monthly council meetings

Local authorities conduct their formal business at monthly council meetings. These are attended by both elected councillors and council staff (officials).

The purpose of these meetings is to allow councillors to carry out their policy-making role and to receive updates from the Chief Executive on the ongoing work of the council.

Council meetings are usually held in the evenings to accommodate councillors, who may have full or part-time jobs in addition to their elected duties.

In general, the only items that can be discussed at council meetings are those that are already on the agenda or those that are required to be dealt with by law (like voting on the annual Budget). However, in exceptional circumstances, councillors can discuss urgent or topical issues.

Councillors' questions

Councillors submit written questions for information to officials in advance of council meetings. This is a formal process that allows them to get specific information, for example in relation to issues which residents may have brought to their attention.

The Chief Executive or council officials provide written responses to the councillors' questions. These are distributed at council meetings, and can also be found on some councils' websites.

Councillors can effectively use council meetings to put questions to the Chief Executive on any matter on the meeting agenda. Through their questioning, councillors seek to influence how projects or services are designed or delivered.

Decisions at council meetings

Councillors take decisions at council meetings based on proposals put by officials. For example, councillors approve bye-laws and various investment projects by voting on them.

They also discuss and vote on motions put on the agenda by councillors. A motion is essentially a proposal placed before a meeting requesting or directing that the local authority takes, or does not take, a certain course of action.

Each councillor is entitled to vote for or against motions put forward at council meetings by other councillors.

If a motion is passed, that is voted for by a majority of councillors, it amounts to a direction from the councillors to the Chief Executive and officials to act in a particular way in developing policy, a service or project.

Councillors have limited powers to overturn operational decisions of the Chief Executive, once these are in line with a council's policies and the law, and are within Budget.

For a motion to lead to an actual change in a council's policies, services or projects, it must be to do with matters that the council is legally responsible for. Councillors cannot direct council staff to do something that they have no legal authority to do.

Strictly speaking the term 'resolution' is used to describe a motion which has been passed by a council. However, often these terms are used interchangeably.



Attending council meetings

Monthly council meetings are open to the public but usually it is necessary to have a councillor sign a visitor into the public gallery. Members of the public are not entitled to speak, take photos or record the meetings.

When significant numbers of residents attend meetings, this is generally a sign that a particular item on the agenda is of local importance. This often leads to more focused debate.

Increasingly council meetings, and some Municipal District meetings, are webcast live and recordings are made available online – check out the body's website for more information.

Council Budgets

A crucial role of the elected councillors is adoption of the local authority's annual Budget. A draft Budget is prepared by council staff under the direction of the Chief Executive and is presented for adoption and possible amendment at a dedicated annual meeting of the council, called the Statutory Budget Meeting.

In practice, the draft Budget presented to the council by the Chief Executive is generally adopted as proposed. The draft and adopted Budgets must be made available for public inspection.

Councillors' 'reserved' powers

When it comes to council policies and bye-laws, councillors have some specific and exclusive powers, known as 'reserved powers'. Chief Executives must get the formal backing of councillors before they can do anything in areas covered by councillors' reserved powers.

The most important reserved powers are to do with:

- Making bye-laws – for example, setting local traffic speed limits
- Adopting the Council’s annual Budget
- Adopting a City or County Development Plan every six years

Council functions that are not reserved for elected members are referred to as ‘executive’ functions and are the responsibility of the Chief Executive and staff. For example, councillors have no authority over staffing issues, which are ‘executive’ functions.

Power balance between councillors and officials

As a collective body, councillors meeting in session at a council meeting have many powers and responsibilities.

However, the concentration of power in relation to day-to-day decision-making lies with Chief Executives and their officials. These are full-time staff, with in-house legal, human and financial resources, as well as ready access to information.

Elected councillors on the other hand work on a part-time basis and rely largely on the Chief Executive and officials for information.

Tensions sometimes arises between councillors and officials about the way in which policy is interpreted or applied.

Bodies that shape councils’ policies and decisions

Each council has a range of bodies which meet to develop advice and offer recommendations on policy to councillors and the Chief Executive.

These structures are part of the complex interplay between officials, public representatives and community volunteers that shape councils’ policies and priorities.

They function effectively as council sub-committees, although strictly speaking not all of them are actual sub-committees.

They are:

- Corporate Policy Group
- Strategic Policy Committees
- Local Community Development Committees
- Municipal Districts
- Public Participation Networks

The diagram on page 11 shows how these different committees and bodies work to influence councils’ policies and decisions. Here is a brief outline of what these bodies do and who is involved in them:

Corporate Policy Group

Each council has a Corporate Policy Group. This consists of the Chief Executive, the Mayor, and the chairs of each of the Strategic Policy Committees, who are always councillors (see below).

The Corporate Policy Group is an in-house forum (it does not meet in public) which gives power to councillors to direct councils' priorities. The idea is that key issues affecting a council and its residents can be debated by members of the Corporate Policy Group before being brought to a meeting of the full council.

For example, the Chief Executive presents a draft of the annual Budget to the Corporate Policy Group, which then forwards it to the full council for consideration.

The Corporate Policy Group is also a link between council officials and elected members and the work of the different Strategic Policy Committees.

The Mayor reports back to the full council on the work of the Corporate Policy Group. The chairs of each Strategic Policy Committee report back to their respective committees on the group's work.

Strategic Policy Committees

Each council must establish Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) to provide input in relation to the formulation, development, monitoring and review of council policy in key areas.

Typically, a council will have several SPCs dealing with policy in relation to key services, like housing, planning, transportation, the environment, economic development and recreation/culture.

Councillors make up about two-thirds of the membership of SPCs. The remaining places are filled by representatives nominated by local employers, trade unions, farming, social inclusion, voluntary and environmental interests. The idea is that these external members bring additional professional knowledge and expertise to the SPCs.

Policy positions agreed by SPCs are sent to the full council for approval at a council meeting. Many SPC recommendations are either adopted in full by councils, or with minor amendments only.

SPCs generally meet four times a year. This means that on a practical level it can be hard for them to maintain momentum around topical or time-sensitive issues.

Local Community Development Committees

Each local authority must have at least one Local Community Development Committee (LCDC).

Councils are free to establish more than one if particular local circumstances warrant it, for example if there are different community development needs in the same council area between rural and urban residents.

LCDCs have two main responsibilities:

- To develop, implement and monitor a six-year Local Economic and Community Plan for each local authority area.
- To oversee the distribution of EU funds through the Social Inclusion and Community Action Programme. These funds are for projects aimed at education, training, social development and enterprise work with marginalised groups and communities.

LCDC members include councillors, representatives of the local partnership/LEADER companies, nominees of the statutory sector such as social protection and education, social partners and nominees from Public Participation Networks (PPNs, see below).

LCDCs were set up as part of a restructuring of local government introduced in 2014. They replace City/County Development Boards which had been in place since 2001.

Municipal Districts

A total of 95 Municipal Districts were established in 2014, creating a new sub-county decision-making tier. They are part of a restructuring of local government which also saw the abolition of Town Councils.

Each council now has between two and six Municipal Districts. For example, Wicklow County Council has five Municipal Districts, while Carlow County Council has two. In certain Councils, Municipal Districts are called Borough or Metropolitan Districts or Area Committees.

Municipal Districts are not directly elected in themselves. Instead, their members are all existing elected councillors drawn from the local electoral area that the district covers.

The rationale behind Municipal Districts is to allow certain decisions to be made at a more local level so that very local issues do not have to be considered in detail at city or county council level.

For example if a new parking or traffic system was being proposed for a particular town, the relevant Municipal District would discuss its pros and cons in detail before adopting a position. This would then be recorded in the minutes of the Municipal District meeting, to be sent to the council for approval.

Municipal Districts meet monthly.

Public Participation Networks

Public Participation Networks (PPNs) exist in each local authority area. They are made up of volunteers from the community, voluntary and environmental sectors.

The idea is that these networks provide a formal structure for organised civil society to influence plans and policies for the development of their local areas.

PPNs are the main channel through which people are selected to participate in the various committees of county and city councils, such as the Strategic Policy Committees and the Local Community Development Committees.

PPNs were introduced in 2014, as part of a restructuring of local government. They replace City/County Community Forums which had been in place for more than fifteen years. Each Municipal District has its own PPN. There are also PPNs for each city/county council, to co-ordinate council level issues.

Each PPN has to draw up its own 'community vision for the well-being of this and future generations'.

When a council has public participant seats to fill on any of its committees or other structures, it notifies the local PPN to ask for representatives to fill the vacant seats. PPN nominees on council and other committees report back on their activities to the wider membership of the PPNs.



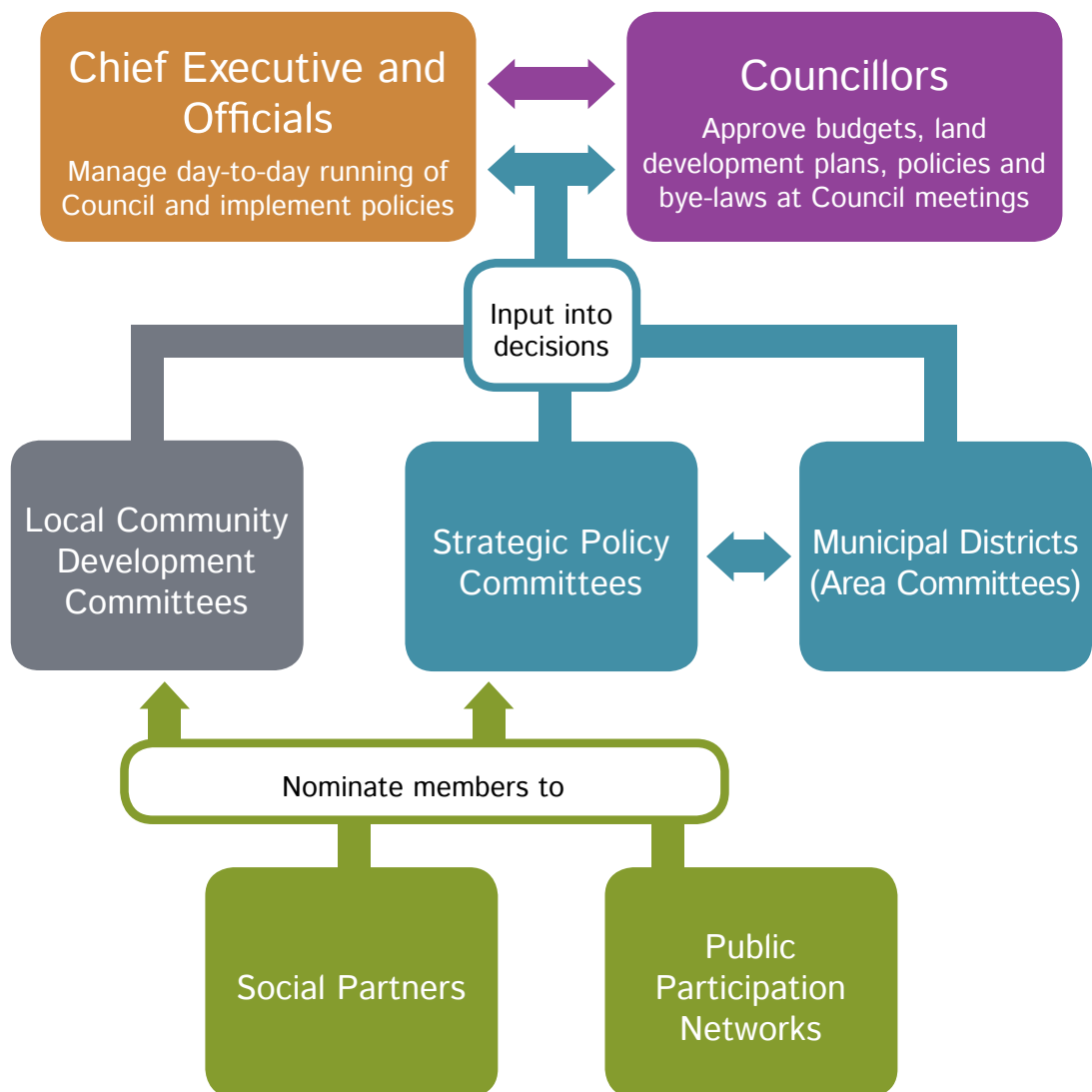
Who can join a PPN?

Membership of PPNs is open to nominees of social inclusion, community and environmental non-profit groups. Individuals who want to become involved in a PPN must be nominated by a group which is registered with their local PPN.

How bodies feed into council decision-making

This diagram illustrates how the various sub-committees and other bodies feed into the formal process of council decision-making.

How Councils Formally Make Decisions



DO-IT-YOURSELF

Working with council officials and councillors

Voters elect the members of their councils. And for many of us, that is where our interest in local democracy ends. While people rarely get involved with the work of their local authorities unless an issue affects them in a very direct way, there are many good reasons for doing so.

Council officials

If you want to see change in your locality, it is open to you as a resident, business person or member of a group to approach any official of your council to:

- Get information on any situation or policy
- Raise any issues or problems
- Seek changes or improvements to council policies or services

For example, residents might want to have restricted parking introduced in their area, to tackle illegal dumping, or have a new playground built.

Council staff hold much more information on almost any subject than councillors. Therefore working directly with officials can sometimes be appropriate.

Your first step should be to find out who in the council might best assist you. You can contact the council by telephone, check its website, or visit its offices.

If it is difficult to make contact with the relevant official, or, if having done so there is no response, you could write to the Chief Executive's office. You should set out a brief summary of your issue and seek a meeting with the appropriate staff to discuss it.

Councillors

The traditional route for residents to get involved in council activities is through their locally elected councillors.

Councillors can be of assistance in identifying the appropriate official to bring your issue to. If you have already tried to work through officials and have not been successful, councillors can also help you in several ways. For example, they can:

- Raise questions on behalf of residents, either informally in conversation with appropriate officials, or in formal meetings.
- Submit written questions to officials in council or Municipal District meetings – it is important that these questions are as specific as possible so that they get a clear response.
- Put down a motion at a monthly council meeting, for example to raise an issue or achieve a particular outcome for a resident or group.

Other ways to get involved in local decision-making

If you would like to become more involved in understanding or shaping local issues, here are some other ways that you can engage with your council:

- Join a Residents' Association or community group
- Take part in public consultations
- Make a submission on the Development Plan
- Give your opinion on individual planning applications
- Monitor ethics rules and codes of conduct
- Make a complaint about a service
- Make a Freedom of Information request

To help you get started, here is some basic information about these opportunities:

Join a Residents' Association or community group

Residents' Associations are one of many types of local groups which are often very effective representative and lobby groups. Others include community development organisations, community councils, Tidy Town committees, sporting clubs, parish councils, active age, youth and arts groups.

Involvement in these kinds of groups can lead to more formal involvement in council activities, as they are often the route to becoming involved in council sub-committees, or being nominated to a Public Participation Network.

Social Partner organisations represent employers, farmers and trade union representatives. They have nominating rights to a number of local authority policy making bodies, including Strategic Policy Committees, Local Community Development Committees and Joint Policing Committees.

Take part in public consultations

Councils carry out formal consultations with the public before adopting many types of policies, including the introduction of new bye-laws or regulations. This process is often referred to a 'going on public display'.

For example, councils frequently seek public input when planning new traffic management schemes, such as where proposed bus-lanes should go or where to introduce or amend parking fees. Councils also regularly organise public consultations on different issues, such as strategies to be adopted for the arts or recreation.

Councils' websites and public notices in local or national newspapers generally indicate when consultations are taking place and how to get involved. Residents are generally invited to make written submissions by a closing date.

All submissions made can be viewed by anybody at council offices. They are also brought to the attention of councillors when they meet to debate and vote on proposed changes.

Make a submission on the Development Plan

Individuals and groups can make submissions when councils are preparing their Development Plan.

The Development Plan is a local authority's blueprint for planning and development in its area for a six year period. It sets out where roads, water supplies, sewage are to be provided.

The plan also 'zones' land for future developments that will affect residents, such as housing, shopping, schools and industry. This affects what type of buildings can be constructed and the how land can be used.

Local authorities publish their Development Plan proposals, maps and analysis on their websites. Some also organise public information sessions.

Council planners must make all decisions on individual planning applications based on the local Development Plan. How land is zoned in a Development Plan can determine whether individual planning applications will succeed or fail.

Give your opinion on individual planning applications

If someone wants to build a house or a commercial premises such as a factory or business anywhere in the country, they have to first seek 'planning permission' from their local authority.

There is a formal procedure for individuals or groups to give their opinions on any planning application. Anyone can examine any planning file for any application for permission, and make written observations or objections within five weeks of its being received by a Council.

For example residents might object to a proposal to build a block of high-rise apartments in a low-rise neighbourhood because they are out of keeping with the general character of the area and because it will shadow existing homes.

Such written submissions to the Planning Department then form part of the file together with all other documents which planners take into consideration when deciding whether to grant or refuse a planning application.

If an individual or group of individuals has made a written observation or objection to a planning application which is subsequently granted by a council they are entitled to appeal that decision to An Bord Pleanála which has the final say on the matter.

The [Toolkit Guide to Citizens and the Environment](#) has more detail on how to get involved in environmental decision-making.



Planning and local residents

The planning process is quite technical and can be confusing for non-experts.

The decision of a council or An Bord Pleanála on a planning applications must be based on what the planning law states or how a particular piece of land is 'zoned' in a council's Development Plan.

For example, residents may legitimately object to a supermarket being built in their neighbourhood because of how it will impact on traffic or litter in the area. However, if the earmarked land has already been zoned for commercial development, then the development is more likely to be approved than rejected.

Monitor ethics rules and codes of conduct

Local authority officials and councillors have a legal duty to act with integrity at all times. Standards and principles of conduct and integrity are set out in codes of conduct.

They cannot accept gifts or hospitality (beyond tokens or customary hospitality) and must take care to avoid conflicts of interest in their official duties. To help ensure the ethics rules are observed, all councillors and certain senior officials, must publicly declare any private interests they may have that could conflict with their public duties and responsibilities.

The reason for these disclosure rules is to help ensure that officials and councillors do not use their public power in the wrong way to benefit their own, or their families, private interests.

Private interests could include things like land or property that they own, shareholdings in companies, contracts with a local authority, or work as a lobbyist. For example, senior planning officials in a council should declare that they own local land, as they might stand to benefit from planning decisions to do with that land.

Councillors and officials declare their interests every year, by filling in a questionnaire.

Some local authorities automatically put these 'ethics declarations' on their websites, along with details of expenses claimed by councillors and political donations. Most councils only make ethics declarations available for inspection in their offices during office hours.

Duty to withdraw from council business

In some circumstances, councillors who have an actual conflict of interest must disclose the interest and withdraw from a council meeting or a committee meeting. This rule applies where a councillor has actual knowledge that that s/he (or a person connected to them, like a spouse or child) has a 'pecuniary or other beneficial interest' in a matter arising at a council or committee meeting.

Making a complaint about ethics rules or codes

As a member of the public, you can complain to your local authority if you believe that councillors or officials have breached ethics rules or codes. These complaints would generally be handled by an official within the local authority, called the Ethics Registrar.

The role of Ethics Registrar rotates among officials, and the relevant official may have other responsibilities as well. To find you who is the Ethics Registrar in your local authority you should generally contact the corporate affairs or finance divisions, who may direct your inquiry to the relevant official.

If the Ethics Registrar considers that there may be a possible contravention of ethics rules or codes of conduct he/she brings that to the attention of the Chief Executive and/or the Cathaoirleach (Mayor) of the council, who consider what action to take.



Where to find ethics rules and codes

The Ethics Rules for councillors and local authority employees are contained in [Part 15 of the Local Government Act 2001](#)

Read the [Code of Conduct for councillors](#)

Read the [Code of Conduct for local authority officials](#)

Make a complaint about a service

If you are unhappy with any aspect of the service of your local authority you can make a formal complaint.

Every council has a complaints policy in place, and many post these on their websites. These detail the procedures for making a complaint and any subsequent appeals.

If you cannot find a council's complaints policy on its website, the best thing to do is to contact the council directly to get this information.

Once a complaint has been formally lodged it is best to exhaust the internal complaints procedure.

If you have done this, and you are not satisfied with the council's decision on your complaint, it is open to you to contact the Office of the Ombudsman. For more information on this, see the [Toolkit Guide to Citizen Watchdogs](#).

Make a Freedom of Information request

Your right to know under our Freedom of Information (FOI) laws applies to all city and county councils, as they are public bodies. You can request official council records, like minutes of meetings and correspondence, with some exceptions.

You should consider making a request for information under FOI only if your efforts to get information simply by asking have failed.

For more on how to make a request for information from your local authority under FOI, see the [Toolkit Guide to FOI](#).

PEOPLE'S STORIES

Kerry community group working to change local attitudes to energy

About Transition Kerry voluntary community group

Transition Kerry is a voluntary community group which works closely with other local groups and Kerry County Council on issues focusing on environmental sustainability, climate change and community 'resilience'.

Its aims to raise awareness and build networks to promote local sustainability in relation to issues such as food, fuel, energy and transport. The group wants to see this vision reflected in policies at local, national and international level.

Here its administrator Niamh Ní Dhúill explains how they work with their local authorities to achieve change:

Working collaboratively

"We work collaboratively with other groups and the local authority. For example, if Tralee County Council is running a festival we will take part as a 'Pop- Up Transition Village' and promote our message in a celebratory way, through food, information stalls and displays.

We organise public events such as film nights and talks a few times a year and we invite people from the council to these – both councillors and officials.

We also run a short Community Resilience course around the county, focusing on planning for a sustainable community, water, waste, food and energy."

Supporting sustainable local energy production

"A few years ago, through our connections with the community and the local authority, we discovered that Tralee Town Council were regenerating council houses which were severely affected by fuel poverty.

They started a retro-fitting project in the area, insulating all of the houses externally and improving the windows. They then built a District Heating System using woodchip from a local wood co-op in North Kerry. We saw this as a really good model of sustainable local energy production and use and we asked them if we could show case it on their behalf, which they were happy to facilitate.

This was a pilot project, and now Kerry County Council is planning to expand the District Heating System to around the greater Tralee town area, including the hospital."

Roadmap for Sustainable Energy

"Through our work with the council and local development company (North and East Kerry Development), we accessed funding through the [LEADER programme](#), to hire a consultant to create a [Sustainable Energy Community Roadmap for Kerry](#).

We launched the Roadmap in May 2014 and we invited the Mayor, local TDs and councillors."

Focus on officials

“We work mostly with council officials because they are there for the long term. We also work to educate our elected councillors, who are often not looking very far down the road – they are often only looking as far the next election.”

Energy Cooperative worker

“Ideally we want to see an Energy Cooperative worker appointed within Kerry County Council to work with local communities and business to help them be more resilient and sustainable in energy.”

Advice for others for getting involved in local issues

“As a group, as much as possible we try to work with existing networks and to work collaboratively and in cooperation with other groups and agencies and local authorities. It is the only way we can connect with other people make changes.

We also interact with officials and councillors through the County Development Plans and the Local Area Plan. Any time the council puts out calls for submissions, we respond. We have seen some of our suggestions being taken on board in the plans when they have redrafted them, which is really encouraging because it doesn't always happen.

For example, our proposals for the council to use green spaces as community gardens or woodlands made it into the Local Area Plan.”

RESOURCES

Find out more about how local government works

- The [Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government](#) oversees the operation of the local government system. It implements government policy in relation to local government structures, functions, human resources and financing. Its website has detailed information about local government as well as links to official policy documents.
- The [Local Government \(Reform\) Act 2014](#) makes legal provision for reforms set out in the Government's 2012 Action Programme for Effective Local Government: Putting People First. Some of the local government structures and functions covered in this guide are contained in this law.
- [The Action Programme for Effective Local Government: Putting People First](#) describes in detail how local government structures work.

Other Local Government Bodies

- The [Irish Local Development Network \(ILDN\)](#) is the representative body of Local Development Companies (LDCs) in Ireland. It promotes and supports the work of LDCs in the areas of social inclusion and local and rural development.
- The [Local Government Management Agency \(LGMA\)](#) is a state agency of the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. Its job is to provide a range of services to the local government sector.

Listen to our podcasts

For more information on topics covered in the Toolkit guides, you can listen to our six-part podcast series – How to be an Active Citizen. These educational programmes aim to help listeners become active citizens in their own lives. The series was broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 Extra in May/June 2016. The podcasts are available on www.tasc.ie/activecitizen



ÚDARÁS
CRAOLACHÁIN
NA hÉIREANN | BROADCASTING
AUTHORITY
OF IRELAND