

Local Democracy Taskforce

Stakeholder Engagement Process

List of Stakeholder Questions

Stakeholders are invited to respond to some or all of the questions in Sections A- E below.

The Taskforce recognises that certain organisations/ individuals may not currently engage with Local Government in a way that allows them to respond to all of the questions posed. Organisations/ individuals should therefore feel free to select the questions which are most relevant to your organisation's area of expertise/ engagement with the local government sector. Please be sure to carefully number your responses when submitting your return. Each section is based on the Pillars of the Taskforce, taken from the Terms of Reference as agreed by Government. In each case, the specific reference from the Terms of Reference, together with some further explanatory text, has been provided in advance of specific questions for ease of reference.

The Government has asked the Taskforce to ensure that the recommendations emerging are actionable. As such consultees are asked to ensure that their submissions take account of this to allow the Taskforce to ultimately ensure that the recommendations emerging will be devised to ensure suitability for implementation.

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)?
 - Among PPN representatives and Secretariat members, there is generally a good understanding of reserved functions. However, among the wider PPN membership, this understanding is limited. The complexity and lack of accessible information contribute to this knowledge gap.
 - b) What changes would you make to support increased use of those powers?

- Develop clear, plain-language public resources explaining reserved functions.
- c) In your view, what further or enhanced powers could/should be delegated to councillors to enable them to carry out their role effectively?
N/A
- d) Is there an awareness and use of the current range of supports for councillors in the sector? N/A
- 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?
- Mandatory training in policy areas like climate, inclusion, housing, and community engagement, along with education on the role of the Public Participation Networks.

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?
Kildare PPN often engages with MDs on:
- Community grants.
 - Public Consultations
- b) In your view, what are the i) strengths and ii) weaknesses of Municipal Districts?

Strengths

- Local knowledge and more accessible forums for community engagement.
- Better alignment of local priorities.

Weaknesses

- Potential uneven allocation of funding

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

- d) What would enable Municipal District members to execute reserved powers more effectively at this level? -
- e) What other new functions could be devolved to municipal district level? -

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 **N/A** authorities which are relevant to the work of your organisation?
- b) In your view, what are the i) strengths and ii) weaknesses of Area Committees? **N/A**

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

- a) What role could a town-focused 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.
 - Advocate for infrastructure, services, and economic development.
 - Provide a more integrated platform for community engagement.
 - Coordinate funding applications and project delivery.
- b) What are the i) opportunities and/or ii) limitations of current local government structures in addressing challenges facing towns and coordinating town focussed activities?

Opportunities:

- Potential for better cohesion between various local activities.

Limitations:

- Risk of duplication unless clearly structured with a strong statutory basis and clear link to MDs.

- c) What are the i) opportunities and/or ii) limitations of current government initiatives in addressing challenges facing towns and coordinating town focussed activities?

Opportunities

- Town and Village Renewal

Limitations

- Often top-down, poorly coordinated with local knowledge or community engagement.

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.
 - Consider mechanisms for ringfencing a portion of commercial rates for community development.
 - b) Are there ways in which debt management can be changed or improved in order to increase fiscal autonomy?
 - c) Are there any new or alternative revenue raising powers that you consider would increase fiscal autonomy?
 - Community benefit contributions from large developments (e.g., solar farms, data centres).

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?
 - Prioritisation of applications should involve both councillors and PPN reps.
 - Develop committees for specific grant oversight with community representation.

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:** How notification of LPT allocations, liability dates and variation notification dates to Revenue Commissioners relate to councillor decision making and the local authority budget process. Earlier notification of allocation and clearer linkage to service improvements.
 - **Local Authority Budget Process:** Consultation and decision making. Extend budget timelines to allow deeper consultation.

- **Municipal Districts:** The process of consultation and decision making in relation to the General Municipal Allocation and Schedule of Municipal District works.
Earlier involvement in General Municipal Allocations and clearer communication with PPNs.

- 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/ members

Budget decisions often come too late for community organisations to engage meaningfully.

- (ii) councillor engagement and consultation?

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?

More power to set MD-level priorities in relation to budgeting

- 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?

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

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?

- b) Are you aware of examples of good engagement with successful outcomes? Please give details?

Yes – the LECP (Local Economic and Community Plan) co-design processes have had positive impacts when PPNs are involved early.

- c) Do you consider the current engagement between local (elected members) and your organisation sufficient? What are the i) strengths and ii) weaknesses of the engagement?

Strengths: Elected members often support the PPN and our events

Weaknesses: Interaction is inconsistent

- d) Are you aware of examples of good engagement with successful outcomes? Please details.
- e) Could local and central government engagement be improved? In what areas? How?
Better alignment of timelines and transparency of consultations
- f) Could local government engagement with your organisation be improved? In what areas? How?
More structured forums with guaranteed follow-up, feedup and feedback.
- g) In your view, what type of mechanism would facilitate timely and meaningful engagement, particularly in relation to policy development, programme design and service delivery?
Digital public consultation tools

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?
- b) How could decision making by the executive in Local Authorities be enhanced to be more transparent?
- Require council staff to record all major decisions and clearly explain why they were made.
 - Publish major decision online for transparency
- c) Are you aware of opportunities for better use of existing powers for councillors?

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?
 - b) Make more detailed local data available in clear and accessible formats,
 - c) Develop real-time dashboards on service delivery. These dashboards would help the community, and the general public easily see how well services are performing, where resources are being used, and where improvements are needed.
- d) Are there specific information/data which you believe would benefit from a particular focus in this regard?
 - schedule and status of road repairs,
 - live updates on road gritting in winter,
 - community grant allocations
 - project progress updates like tree planting etc.
- e) Are there specific actions which could be taken to enhance your organisation's role/ involvement in respect of information/ data availability in local government?
 - Include PPNs in data co-design processes.
 - Enable access to GIS platforms to map Kildare Public Participation Network members and the services they provide.
- f) How could public awareness of the role and impact of the Council be improved? Further utilise digital tools and local media/social media for information and transparency campaigns.

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?
Increase frequency and timeliness of reviews.
- b) Are there other ways in which the role of NOAC could be strengthened?
Publish plain-language summaries of findings.
- c) How could the transparency of NOAC's work be enhanced?
Enable public submissions to NOAC reviews.
- d) How could the timeliness of NOAC's work be enhanced?
- 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?
 - Public reporting
 - Mandatory follow up actions

4. **The Taskforce will examine how the current number of councillors is determined.**
 - a) What methodology could be used to amend the numbers of councillors to account for population growth?

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?
 - Provide paid training and mentoring for candidates from underrepresented groups.
 - Offer childcare, transport, and accessibility supports.
 - b) What are the barriers to accessing the role of Councillor for women or people from other diverse backgrounds?
 - Financial barriers
 - Lack of Access to Networks or Political Support
 - Times of meetings
 - Language and Communication Barriers

Section E: General and Conclusion

1. What is the nature (e.g., policy development; programme design; service delivery) of your Organisation's interaction with:
 - (a) local authorities
 - Consultation on policy and plans
 - Community representation.
 - (b) local councillors
 - Representation on SPC's and committees alongside Councillors

2. Does your organisation work with:

a) Individual local authorities	YES/NO
b) Sub-county/city structures (Municipal Districts/Area Committees	YES/NO
c) National organisations (e.g., AILG, LAMA, CCMA)	YES/NO

3. Do you have any other suggestions or information that you would like the Taskforce to consider?
 - Place community development at the centre of all reforms.
 - Statutory recognition of the PPN in all consultations.

- Mandatory training for councillors and staff on community engagement.