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Reforming local government: Past, present and future

Mark Callanan

Institute of Public Administration, Ireland

Abstract

Reform of local government in Ireland has tended to involve both reform initiatives that mirror broader trends in public service reform nationally, as well as reform initiatives that are distinctive to the local government sector. Amongst the former we can include managerial reforms, digitisation and efforts to make local government more open and accountable. Other initiatives have included changes to the service portfolio of local government, pointing to an enhanced role in some fields and a reduced role in others. Some reforms can be characterised as enduring – in that they have been recurring themes in successive reform programmes. Other reform themes have been somewhat more occasional or sporadic and arguably brought about by the specific circumstances in which they were implemented. Looking to the future, we might speculate that upcoming challenges may include how public services generally can cope with diversity in addressing challenges that are likely to vary in different parts of Ireland, for example, based on distinctions between urban, suburban and rural areas. The article appeals for a more evidence-based approach to reform in the local government sector – this should be aided by existing research contributions and the enhanced evaluation capacity that exists in the Irish public service.

Keywords: Centralisation, city regions, devolution, local government, metropolitan governance, evaluation

Introduction

The reform of local government in Ireland has had several dimensions, and different aspects of the local government system have undergone changes and reform over the years. And a variety of research outputs by Richard Boyle have helped inform and shape the debate over reform. These include contributions dealing with local government management arrangements (Boyle, 1996), structural reform and reorganisation (Boyle, 2016; Boyle et al., 2020; O’Riordan & Boyle, 2015), skills and capacity in local government (Boyle & O’Riordan, 2013), cost recovery (Boyle, 2012), performance measurement (Boyle, 2000), as well as reviews of local government reform programmes more generally (Boyle, 2014a; Boyle et al., 2003). In addition, of course, other research interests that Richard has pursued across the wider public service on themes such as strategy, regulatory reform, performance, evaluation, and coordination across organisations and more ‘joined up’ government have also given us valuable insights and have relevance to the local government sector. As well as his intellectual contributions, at a more personal level Richard has always over the years been available to offer advice, assistance and wisdom, as well as bringing a calmness and rationality to discussions. It is therefore a pleasure to contribute to this special edition of *Administration*.

Recurring themes in successive proposals and policy initiatives around local government reform over the decades have included issues such as territorial restructuring at regional level, city/county level and sub-county level, greater financial resources and autonomy, governance and management reforms, changes to the functional responsibilities of local government, and an enhanced developmental role for local government, including the bringing together of a range of governmental and non-governmental actors at local level (for a useful overview, see Quinn, 2015). This article looks at past and current reform themes, but also takes a slightly more speculative perspective to try to reflect on some of the longer-term trends that may have an influence on local government reform into the future.

The article first addresses the service portfolio of local government, how this has evolved over time, not just in terms of the services provided but also how they are provided. Second, the paper examines the increased prominence given to city regions as engines of growth for their wider hinterland in the context of globalisation, and associated issues of metropolitan governance and local government

leadership. Finally, the article concludes with some remarks about issues that seem subject to either continuous or more occasional reform, and themes that might reflect the path of future reform of local government.

Service provision – Centralisation, devolution and new approaches

The past decades have been marked by changes in the functional responsibilities of local government, both with some transfer of responsibilities upwards from local to higher levels, and with some examples of devolution of responsibilities to the local level. In this respect, Ireland is no different from other jurisdictions. Some responsibilities have transferred to national bodies, the most notable recent example being water supply and waste water treatment transferring to Irish Water, albeit with service level agreements currently in place. Reflecting wider trends in agencification, some specific tasks have also transferred to specific national agencies, such as Transport Infrastructure Ireland, the Road Safety Authority, the Environmental Protection Agency, and other bodies, such as Student Universal Support Ireland.

On the other hand, local government has taken on a more formal and central role in areas such as economic development and enterprise support, an expanded role that has been ‘actively embraced’ by local authorities (Quinn, 2015, p. 20). For example, audited expenditure in local government on economic development and enterprise supports rose from €75 million in 2013 to €222 million in 2018 (figures include spending on economic development, community, and enterprise and tourism) (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, n.d.; Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, n.d.). Quinn (2015) also notes how the role of local government in social inclusion has steadily increased since the 1980s, with the enhanced role in local development from 2014 expected to further enhance the social role of local government. Local government has also gained a limited input into local policing through the joint policing committees established from 2006. Other increased areas of activity include climate change adaptation and mitigation. Even though this is an area of work that transcends several local government service areas and budget lines from housing, roads and transport, environment, and spatial planning, again an indication of the increased focus on this area of work can be

gleaned from an increase in expenditure on climate change and flooding from €2.1 million in 2018 to budgeted expenditure of €8.9 million in 2020 (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, n.d., 2020).

Despite these developments, it could not be said that greater devolved authority for local government has been a priority in local government reform (Rhodes & Boyle, 2012). The contrast therefore remains with other developed European states, where the norm would be for a more developed local government role in areas such as education, public transport, primary healthcare and social care. To some extent this reflects Ireland's local government system as one that resonates with the Anglo-Saxon administrative tradition, where the emphasis is placed on managerialism within a relatively restricted role for the state, with local government tending to have a relatively weak political and legal status (Bouckaert & Kuhlmann, 2016; Dollery et al., 2008). Although even amongst states within this tradition, the role of local government in service provision in Ireland remains relatively modest.

The *Putting People First* programme had signalled the potential for greater devolution. It included a pledge that 'the functions of government at local level will be performed through the local government system to the greatest possible extent. No separate structures or organisations of public service or administration will be established outside of the local government system unless necessitated by clearly demonstrated exceptional circumstances' (Government of Ireland, 2012, p. 3). In the run-up to the negotiations of the 2020 programme for government, it was reported that proposals had been developed to give local government a much more central role in childcare provision and in making facilities available (McEnroe, 2020). When the final programme for government was published, the document instead referred to the proposal to establish a new national body, Childcare Ireland, to support childcare providers. This example is merely a reflection of a much wider trend in the Irish administrative tradition: namely a preference for establishing national single-purpose agencies as a means of addressing what are often highly localised issues or services, and where circumstances and demand for service differ across distinct localities – or, as Moylan (2011) has put it, a functional as opposed to a territorial approach. This is not to suggest that national agencies are always a bad idea, and indeed they are often vital in specialised areas of service provision – rather it is to highlight the

fact that establishing a national body seems to have long taken hold as the primary policy option in dealing with issues in a way which would be unusual in other jurisdictions.

In terms of political priorities around local government service areas, we may reasonably predict that housing (see Umfreville & Sirm in this issue), economic development and climate change might be expected to remain priorities over the medium term. The role of local government in providing supports to small businesses became particularly prominent during the Covid-19 pandemic. Local government also played a key role in the 'Community Call' initiative during the Covid-19 pandemic, setting up local community response forums and local helplines, and working with the voluntary sector in mobilising local responses to the pandemic – for example, in terms of providing community assistance to the elderly and other vulnerable groups cocooning during the restrictions (Clarke, 2020; Shannon et al., 2020).

In addition to changes in the local government service portfolio, the means by which local authorities provide services have also evolved over the years. Examples include a greater use of technology, quality improvement and a greater emphasis on citizen participation. Many of these initiatives of course mirror contemporary practices and innovations across the wider public service, and reflect a blend of New Public Management (NPM) and post-NPM reform ideas (Boyle, 1995; MacCarthaigh, 2017). In addition, in some areas local government has stepped back from a direct service provision role. Some services are outsourced to contractors. Some service areas are characterised by greater use of shared service approaches, where neighbouring local authorities pool their resources when this can be justified based on objective criteria. Indeed, independent reviews have acknowledged that in areas such as shared services, performance measurement and online procurement processes, local government has been in the vanguard of introducing reforms within the wider public service (Local Government Efficiency Review Group, 2010; OECD, 2008).

Equally, however, as well as local government stepping back from direct provision in some areas, there may be other areas where new demands may emerge that might require a public policy response, if not in delivery at least in terms of ensuring that delivery occurs. The childcare example is one but there are perhaps others too on the horizon. During the 1990s government decided on a market-based approach to address the major increase in the demand for

childcare provision. One may reasonably ask, in the context of new demands likely to emerge over the next decade or so (such as care for the elderly), whether we again wish to leave provision largely to the market, or whether there is a need for a government-led response. Such choices of course ultimately come down to political decisions, but it is worth debating these issues on what are locally based services.

Changing perspectives on place and the rise of the metro

The outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 highlighted how community spirit and our sense of place could be marshalled in a period of crisis, with neighbours helping each other out in a shared cause and a spirit of civic responsibility. In some ways this arguably reinforced our affinity with our locality and sense of belonging to a community. Equally, however, the pandemic brought into focus new ways of working that place less emphasis on where people work. At least for some, more remote working offers opportunities for more flexible choices around where people live and work, as well as potentially having implications for areas such as housing demand and commuting patterns. The pandemic may also have accentuated the long-standing trend of some businesses becoming far more mobile and less attached to place. Localities have to compete with each other to attract both residents and businesses. Companies will of course look at a range of factors when choosing where to do business. Some of these (such as labour market costs and corporate taxation) are national policy issues, but others have much more local dimensions – these include transport and environmental infrastructure, access to broadband, adequate housing supply, proximity to other firms working in particular sectors, local educational facilities and skills, and quality of life and the general attractiveness of the area as a place to live and work.

Ongoing trends such as globalisation, greater capital and labour mobility, and more intense international competition have also been linked with increased interest in the concept of ‘city regions’ or metropolitan governance, given the importance of cities as hubs of economic, social, educational, environmental and cultural assets (Pike et al., 2017; Scott, 2001). The terms city region and metropolitan governance have become part of the popular and political discourse around sub-national reform internationally, to the extent that they have become contested and subject to competing definitions (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008). However, there is general consensus on the use of the terms around capturing the wider functional urban area of

not just a core city but also its suburban and rural hinterland, which typically span several traditional administrative boundaries.

Ireland has not been immune to such debates. Various sources have highlighted the importance of city regions as motors of economic growth and innovation, as well as acting as transport, communications, cultural and educational hubs for the wider region (Morgenroth, 2018; National Competitiveness Council, 2009; National Economic and Social Council, 2008). The *National Planning Framework* also recognises the role that city regions play as a focal point for mobile investment and the need for more concentrated growth of Irish cities to create larger centres of scale (Government of Ireland, 2018). In the Irish context the importance of investing in second-tier cities as counterpoints to the traditional dominance of Dublin has also been highlighted (Brady, 2016), even if thus far there has been a suggested reluctance to embrace the metropolitan level within the Irish system (Moore-Cherry & Tomaney, 2019).

The question of the appropriate governance model to accompany these trends has also arisen in international debates. One model, the directly elected mayor, has become more prevalent in reforms internationally, although it is by no means universal. Different variants of the mayoral model exist, and different options have been considered in the context of the potential introduction of directly elected mayors in Ireland in what has been a rather 'on-off' debate spanning over two decades (for a review, see Callanan, 2019). The decision of Limerick voters in a 2019 plebiscite to approve the introduction of a directly elected mayor, as well as the proposed citizens' assembly on local government in Dublin, no doubt mean that this debate will continue. Thus far the debate in Ireland seems to have been unhelpfully narrow in at least two respects. Firstly, it seems to be assumed that introducing directly elected mayors would inherently be a positive development. However, there are other models of local government leadership worth considering (O'Malley, 2019). Secondly, even if we were to proceed with directly elected mayors, the discussion thus far has been exclusively concerned with the powers of a mayor arising from a redistribution of the current role of the local council and chief executive based on the existing suite of local government services. This seems unnecessarily restrictive. In order for such a position to play a meaningful role, it needs to reflect powers beyond the existing portfolio of local government services. Perhaps the most obvious of these lies in the field of public transport (given the links with spatial planning and roads) but there are other candidate service areas too.

Coping with diversity in a small state

Ireland is a small state – this simple truism, however, can blind us to the fact that Ireland is also characterised by considerable diversity. Local areas are different in a whole range of ways. Some of these differences are obvious; others perhaps less so. One distinction can be made between rural, suburban and urban areas. Areas differ according to population change and population density. But they can also differ according to other demographic and social factors, such as age profile, levels of migration, income levels or poverty rates. They can differ based on topography and the physical profile of the area. They can differ based on their economic profile, key business sectors and labour market conditions – in short the skills needs of employers in east Mayo are unlikely to be the same as the skills needs of employers in Cork City! Climate change models suggest that the consequences of climate change in Ireland will be highly regionalised – drier summers and water shortages for some areas, stormier winters for other areas, increased likelihood of flooding in different river and coastal areas. Housing is another area with strong local and regional dimensions, given that housing demand varies in different parts of the country, with different market conditions existing in different areas. The future therefore is likely to be characterised by increased demographic, social, economic and environmental diversity between local areas.

Equity and equal treatment are laudable principles and values associated with public service provision. In the Irish context, however, there can be a tendency for these principles to prompt attempts to introduce uniform solutions. Much as we may desire consistency in approach (and indeed the culture of many institutions tends to favour uniform solutions), it should not surprise us that as Ireland becomes more diverse, uniform ‘one size fits all’ approaches will become less and less effective into the future. We therefore need a way of coping with diversity in our approach to service provision, not just for the current suite of services provided by local government but for public services generally.

As Ireland responds to the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic in the period after 2020, and seeks to address the multiple public health, social, economic and environmental implications that have arisen, government should seek to act on evidence rather than precedent (see, for example, Murphy & Hogan in this issue). During the last global financial crisis, many necessary reforms were pursued in Ireland to redress the public deficit. Some decisions, however, seemed

to owe more to intuition than to evidence. One welcome development following the global financial crisis was to greatly expand the knowledge, skills and capacity within the Irish public service for analysis, evaluation and, through this, a more evidence-informed approach to policymaking (Boyle, 2014b). This additional resource should not be wasted as we respond to the current challenges. In the local government sector, for example, we know from both international and domestic research that changing local government structures matters far less than assessing the potential for scale effects at a service level, at least as a means of realising savings (Callanan et al., 2014; Turley et al., 2018).

Quinn (2015) characterises the long-term path of local government reform as combining elements of innovation, incrementalism and entrenchment. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the local government reform process seems to exhibit a blend of almost continuous change in some areas on the one hand, and rigidity and much more occasional adaptation on the other. Firstly, some dimensions of local government reform seem at this point to be almost continuous themes through successive reform programmes. Thus, reforms over the past three decades (and arguably longer) have placed an emphasis on managerial reform, internal processes and ensuring greater productivity in local government. This includes initiatives around areas such as corporate planning, performance measurement, service improvements and quality, digitisation and generally ensuring local councils are more responsive to service users. Another enduring theme in local government reform has been around creating new mechanisms, alongside the traditional electoral process, for involving local groups and citizens in local decision-making. Some of these, such as public participation networks, strategic policy committees and youth councils, are semi-institutionalised, whereas others are more experimental and are being used by individual local councils, such as online deliberative fora, consultation hubs, citizen surveys or participatory budgeting (Quinlivan, 2017; Shannon & O'Leary, 2020).

Secondly, there are other issues that, while they might be frequently discussed in debates over local government, seem to be subject to more occasional *actual* change or adaptation. Amongst these one could include issues that display far more rigidity and only occasional change, such as introducing new revenue sources, or devolving new responsibilities to local government. On finance and revenue, one former minister with responsibility for local government referred to a 'small library' of reports published over a forty-year period making the

case for a new form of local taxation in Ireland. Ultimately, it took a unique set of circumstances brought about by the financial crisis in the years after 2008, along with external pressure (and political ‘cover’) to diversify the tax base provided by the troika, as the means by which a limited form of Local Property Tax was introduced. While further reforms to the Local Property Tax seem likely, this was a welcome initiative in moving towards greater autonomy and accountability for local government. In terms of devolution, the rhetoric of successive programmes for government and party manifestos over the past number of decades on the surface reflects a strong aspiration towards devolution, littered as they are with commitments to ‘making local government stronger’, ‘working with local communities’, ‘strengthen local democracy’ and ‘devolve new powers’. However, the actual trend has tended to be a steady drift of service responsibilities away from local government to national bodies. While the greater role for local government both in local development and in supporting local enterprises introduced in 2014 is a welcome redress in that respect, this has been the exception rather than the rule in most reform initiatives. One might also argue that the cumulative effect of this functional drift has been to lessen the involvement of local authorities in their traditional role of infrastructure provision (although it would be misleading to overstate this point), towards a greater emphasis on the role of local government in supporting not just physical development but also the social and economic development of their area.

I have elsewhere argued (Callanan, 2018) that four inter-related themes, reflecting both elements of continuity and change, are likely to remain pertinent in influencing the future reform of local government:

- Efficiency – The economic consequences of the pandemic mean that the demand for efficiency and effectiveness across government may well be accentuated. This will involve continuous examination not just of the internal workings of local government but also of how local government works with other public bodies and non-governmental organisations operating locally.
- Participation – Continuing innovation in engaging citizens in local decision-making seems likely, as a complement to the electoral process and representative democracy. This area continues to be highly experimental (both in Ireland and

internationally), with a variety of different approaches and mechanisms employed.

- Leadership – A more clearly defined leadership role could involve bringing public bodies together as a way of giving local effect to the ambition in public service reform programmes to strengthen ‘whole of government’ collaboration across the public service. Leadership is of course also reflected in ongoing debates over mayoral structures, even if the debate thus far seems somewhat narrow around the potential role of mayors, and indeed over whether other models for strengthening leadership within local government are worth considering.
- Empowerment – As suggested above, the future is likely to be characterised by greater diversity, with different conditions and circumstances applying in different localities and regions. A public debate is needed over which areas of service provision we would want to be standardised across the country, and which areas it might be desirable to allow for greater variability to adapt services to local circumstances and priorities. Crucially, such a debate cannot be confined to the current suite of local government services, but should extend across the wider public service.

As noted above, the past decade has seen considerable investment in improving the policy analysis, research and evaluation capacity in the Irish public service. As we move to the next phase of local government reform, no doubt Richard Boyle’s extensive research contributions to many different dimensions of reform in this area will continue to resonate in the years to come.

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