

ACCOUNTABLE & EFFECTIVE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Elections Manifesto 2009

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade we have fundamentally changed the face of local Government. We gave constitutional recognition to local government, implemented an ongoing programme for local Government reform, ended the practice where governments arbitrarily delayed local elections and abolished the practice where TDs and Senators could be members of a local authority. We have put in place a wide range of legislation to improve the planning, delivery and oversight of all aspects of local government.

The work of reform and improvement must go on, but the work which has already been completed means that local authorities are far more active in coordinating and delivering high quality services than in the past.

This is a time of unprecedented economic challenges both at home and abroad. No party or candidate can campaign with credibility in this election on the basis of arbitrary promises to increase spending – local government does not work in isolation from the rest of the economy and society. However, there is still a lot which can be achieved by local authorities during the next five years. In particular, we believe that significant progress can be made in the areas of:

- Implementing, at a local level, policies which will supplement Government policy to maintain and increase employment in local communities;
- Increasing public accountability of local government;
- Improving the planning and oversight of service delivery;
- Using local planning as a foundation for recovery and job creation;
- Delivering investment in key services to continue to improve the quality of life of all our citizens;
- Realising the Government's ambitions, at local government level, to transform all areas of the public sector as set out in the Transforming Public Services Programme.

In the period ahead, as Ireland seeks to chart a path through challenging economic times, Fianna Fáil's local agenda is rooted in:

- Managing and improving urban development and ensuring regional coherence in planning strategies, within an overall national framework;
- Maintaining a vibrant rural Ireland in a way that protects its communities and its landscape, its built and natural heritage and the quality of our water;
- Ensuring flexibility in the management of scarce staffing and financial resources.

This manifesto addresses key issues within local authorities and also national initiatives which significantly impact of the delivery of local services.

Brian Cowen, TD
Taoiseach
Uachtarán Fhianna Fáil

ACCOUNTABLE AND EFFECTIVE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

For many years local government in Ireland operated without any credible structures for ensuring that there was effective public oversight and involvement. This has changed significantly, with the direct engagement of the public central to many key reforms. In addition, measures have been implemented in order to ensure high ethical standards.

We believe that recent improvements have confirmed the value of an ongoing reform programme and are committed to implementing further measures.

Continuing Reform

The reform process of local government must continue to ensure this country's positive development. The Programme for Government includes a commitment to reform local government to make it more transparent and more responsive to its customers. Fianna Fáil will continue to ensure that local government is responsive to an ever-changing Ireland. At local level, we believe policies must be pursued that will take account of:

- Continued population growth and balanced regional development;
- Tackling social exclusion and integrating new communities;
- Improved environmental management in areas such as waste, water quality, built and natural heritage protection, and the challenges of climate change;
- Ensuring greater connection between local government and local people;
- Maximising employment opportunities both locally and nationally.

Better local government means a better quality of life for all our people. Fianna Fáil believes in a continued focus on Quality Customer Service from Local Authorities.

Mayors

We believe that the provision of directly elected mayors has the potential to mark a further step-change - improving local government leadership, legitimacy, accountability and civic engagement. However, we also acknowledge that this move must be made on the basis of careful planning and legislation. Specifically we will:

- Support the introduction of a directly elected Mayor for Dublin to be accompanied by comprehensive legislation providing for an effective balance of responsibilities and public oversight;
- Examine proposals to provide directly elected chairs in other local authority areas;
- Ensure that as part of these reforms there will be greater accountability for the performance of mayoral functions through initiatives such as open 'Question Time' sessions and formal reports on both proposals and their implementation.

Other Structural Reforms

We will:

- Establish a Boundary Commission to make recommendations on the most appropriate local governance structures and/or boundaries for the regional Gateway towns and cities;
- Review the balance of power between the elected member and the manager;
- Ensure chairs of each local authority's Strategic Policy Committees are elected for the full term of the council to ensure continuity of policy over the full term of a Council.

Financing Local Government

Fianna Fáil made the first significant move to give local authorities a local source of funding with the establishment of the Local Government Fund. The introduction of a transparent Development Levy system helped raise funding for the provision of water, sewerage, roads and community facilities. However these moves, welcome as they were, did not solve the perennial question of the need for distinct funding of local government. In difficult economic times, this question is all the more relevant.

The Commission on Taxation is examining options for the future financing of local government. It is a highly complex matter. The Commission has undertaken a consultation with the relevant parties. Fianna Fáil will move the process forward quickly following the publication of the Commission's recommendations. Any change in the funding arrangements must be based on the principles of:

- Equity;
- Accountability;
- Sustainability.

In the present economic difficulties we believe that Local Government can play a significant part in ensuring the principle aim of Government - protecting and maintaining jobs - is achieved. For this reason, Fianna Fáil makes the following commitments:

Business Rates

On councils where Fianna Fáil have a controlling majority we will "freeze" rates for the first three years. In addition, we will support a comprehensive review of these rates to be carried out jointly by Enterprise Ireland and representatives of local government and with a wide consultation process.

Development Levies

Development levies are an important part of ensuring that public services are available when major developments occur. There is evidence that in the current economic climate they are acting as a disincentive to the progression of many projects from single houses to major developments. At a time when it is important to try to maintain and increase employment by stimulating economic activity, Fianna Fáil will cut all development levy charges by 50% for a two year period for all projects through the planning system and those which have been substantially completed in that 2 year period.

We will ensure that tax and rate payers do not have to pay a disproportionate amount for the provision of extended services by providing a payback to the local authorities through the Local Government Fund.

Local Authorities and Employment

Local authorities cannot by themselves deliver recovery and job creation but they can potentially play an important role. We are committed to ensuring that each local authority immediately prepares a strategy for how it can, through its procedures and programmes, assist in the retention and creation of employment.

County and City Enterprise Boards

Many Irish small and medium enterprises have the potential, with the right supports, to grow and become even more significant individual employers in their own right.

For new and micro-enterprises, our City and County Enterprise Boards (CEBs) play a pivotal role in each city and county in bringing business ideas to life that result in local job creation. Fianna Fáil will:

- continue to support sustainable growth-orientated local micro-enterprises through the CEBs to deliver high quality job creation;
- increase the provision of repayable finance or quasi-loan facilities available to local micro-enterprises through the CEBs;
- upgrade the CEBs' grant offerings with new grants for local enterprise consisting of priming grants, business expansion/development grants and feasibility/innovation grants;
- promote and support relevant business and professional training for voluntary agencies, as significant local employers, through the CEBs.

Supporting Local Enterprise through National Agencies

For established enterprises, the work of Enterprise Ireland is vital to growing our indigenous base of exporting companies, achieving export-led recovery and growth for our economy and, as a result, sustaining and creating new jobs at home. At a local level, Fianna Fáil will:

- Ensure that the national enterprise agencies work closely with the CEBs;
- Support local indigenous companies, and the jobs they provide, through the current global downturn by the provision of a €100m Enterprise Stabilisation Fund;
- Prioritise capital investment for the development of Community Enterprise Centres to provide the local infrastructure necessary for businesses to grow throughout the regions;
- Expand the role of Innovation Vouchers in allowing growing local enterprises bridge the innovation gap in getting their product or service to market.

Local and Rural Enterprise

We will ensure through the new streamlined local development structures that cover all parts of the country since 2008 that the €1 billion of state, European Union and private funding under the Rural Development Programme will create 12,000 jobs in locally-based rural enterprise between now and 2013.

FDI for all Regions

Attracting foreign direct investment will continue to play a pivotal role in Fianna Fáil's strategy for job creation throughout the country. The creation of "clusters" has proved successful in attracting investment to various hubs throughout the country. Fianna Fáil is committed to ensuring that all regions benefit to the greatest extent possible from foreign direct investment. Within the last year, we have given a policy direction to IDA Ireland in pursuit of this aim. Fianna Fáil will now designate specific funding for the promotion of those counties that have not benefited from a foreign direct investment creating in excess of 150 jobs in the past five years.

Business Interaction with Local Authorities

Fianna Fáil is committed to ensuring that local businesses' interaction with their local authorities is a positive experience. To that end, Fianna Fáil will:

- Proceed with the establishment of Business Support Units to act as a point of contact within each local authority to ensure a quick and co-ordinated response to business needs within each local authority;
- Establish a high level working group to, in conjunction with local authority managers, identify ways to improve the enterprise and business support environment in each local authority area.

Local Training and Support for Jobseekers

Fianna Fáil has more than doubled, to 92,000, the number of local short-term training places available for jobseekers that need to re-skill or up-skill in 2009. Nationally, some 128,000 training and activation places have been provided for in 2009, resulting in a significant range of options for jobseekers in each community. Fianna Fáil remains committed to supporting Community Employment Schemes as an essential activation measure that also provides a significant benefit to local communities. To assist jobseekers further, Fianna Fáil will:

- review provision for and the structure of the Community Employment programme to ensure it meets current needs;
- ensure best value and return for our investment in training programmes in each region, reflecting the skills need of local and growing enterprises;
- provide places in local authorities for participants on the new Work Experience Scheme to ensure that each town, city or county area can benefit from the skills of participants as they gain valuable work experience;
- undertake an early evaluation of the pilot training programme aimed at sustaining vulnerable employment and if evaluation is positive organise expansion across the country.

Improved Delivery of Local Services

Fianna Fáil believes that one of the main challenges facing local government is to continue to improve performance and customer service. Real progress has been made in the area of efficiencies and value for money in Local Government, as acknowledged in the Indecon Review of Local Government Financing, and we now have to bring this progress to the next stage.

Fianna Fáil will pursue policies that deliver efficiencies and flexibility, encourage the sharing of resources between authorities where appropriate and ensure the recruitment of staff to match the requirements of local government.

We will:

- Drive efficiency in Local Government building on recent improvements in financial management systems and service indicators;
- Insist on an efficiency dividend, the proceeds of which will be ring-fenced for labour intensive capital projects or enterprise supports;
- Introduce further performance benchmarks across the system and reward top performing Local Authorities financially;
- Ensure the issue of increasing shared services is pursued in co-operation with other local authorities and public bodies;
- Work with voluntary disability organisations to improve access to services and facilities, including services for older people;
- Disability-proof services and facilities provided by each Local Authority or their contractors;
- Ensure Service Indicators are consistently evaluated and updated.

We also believe there is greater potential for the best performing local authorities to share experience and for good performance to be better communicated to the public. Better showcasing through awards can also highlight best performance.

Better Use of ICT

Fianna Fáil will continue to promote the innovative use of ICT in driving improved local services, and maximising existing resource use, over the coming years.

- In addition, we believe that all local authorities should review the level and timeliness of information provision online and adopt new formal targets for improvement in this area;
- The plenary sessions of all county or city councils should be made available by live-stream together with the detailed agenda and documents before the council.

Customer Charters

Fianna Fáil is committed to developing a Local Authority Customer Service Charter. This Charter will be informed by recent evaluations of Customer Service Charters within the Civil Service.

Ethics

A wide range of legislation introduced during the last decade has brought in a completely new framework for ethics within local government – something which has directly dealt with the worst actions of previous times. While local authorities should still take charge of ensuring compliance with all ethical requirements, a greater oversight role can still be played by the Standards in Public Office Commission.

- While the recently introduced local electoral expenditure limits are necessary, we will ensure that their operation is reviewed to ensure that the bureaucracy involved is appropriate and is not unduly burdensome on candidates, especially those who do not have access to extensive technical support.
- Within Fianna Fáil, we will increase advice services and formal regulations to ensure the highest level of compliance with legislative requirements and the guidelines of the Standards in Public Office Commission for all councillors and candidates.

Getting the Best for the Community from Public Services and Public Funding

Fianna Fáil believes that all services must be paid for, either through taxation or direct charges and the public should be told this. Those who tell the public that they can have a whole plethora of extra services with no charges or taxes to pay for them are being misleading. We will continue to work smartly to get the best value for communities from the programmes and schemes we are funding.

Rural Development and Planning

We believe that planning and development procedures must enable rural communities to thrive. We introduced the Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines in 2005 to get a balance in protecting those areas under pressure from over-development through urban-generated housing and facilitating new homes in rural areas that have a local housing need or that have suffered population decline and fragmentation. At Government level we will establish a National Monitoring Committee on rural planning to ensure sustainable rural planning for living and for working.

An Ghaeltacht

We will continue to work at local and national level to ensure that local authorities fulfil their obligation to protect the unique linguistic identity of the Gaeltacht including promoting Irish as the community language.

Transport

A proper transport system is an essential element of any measurement of the quality of life of our citizens. Great progress has been made in improving our transport system all over Ireland with improved roads and public transport facilities. We will complete our motorway system next year. The level and standard of our bus and rail services has improved beyond recognition. Fianna Fáil remains committed to continued improvements in the years ahead.

Rural Transport

Fianna Fáil introduced the Rural Transport Initiative and maintained an €11 million investment this year. We remain committed to improving the service in the years ahead.

We are exploring the option of providing a full scale transport system in rural areas using the network expertise of Bus Éireann, the physical infrastructure and personnel resources of the school transport system and the financial resources currently being spent on transport by the HSE and the Department of Education and Science. Local Authorities will have a central role in any new system that may emerge.

Roads

Fianna Fáil has overseen a massive increase in investment in local roads in recent years.

Our priority is to:

- Cut travelling times;
- Protect the environment;
- Improve safety;
- Reduce congestion.

Under Fianna Fáil:

Driving conditions have been transformed across large parts of the non-national road network. Thousands of kilometres of non-national roads which were considered deficient have been restored to good condition. This year, on average, Government will spend almost €6,000 per km through its non-national road investment programme.

Fianna Fáil will:

- Maintain a high level of spending on local roads over the next 5 years;
- Continue the investment in local roads to service new housing, industrial and commercial development;
- Open up areas for tourism development by improving road access in rural areas;
- Complete our investment programme to ensure that non-national roads are properly signposted;
- Allocate a portion of the budget on road improvement projects to the provision of new footpaths to allow pedestrians to walk in greater safety and comfort;
- Implement the "Smarter Travel" Policy in full consultation and cooperation with Local Authorities;
- Vigorously pursue the implementation of the recently published "Cycle Framework Policy" with the assistance of the Local Authorities.

In 2009, work will continue on a total of 18 major national road projects, all of which are proceeding on time and on budget. A total of six major national road projects are due to be completed in 2009.

The National Road Authority (NRA) is on target to ensure the completion of all five major inter-urban routes linking Dublin to Cork, Galway, Limerick, Waterford and the Border by 2010 as expected.

This will reduce travelling times between all parts of the country and increase the international competitiveness of all our regions.

Following the completion of the motorway programme we will prioritise national road investment in national secondary routes nationwide.

Fianna Fáil will:

- Continue to work to ensure the completion of essential road infrastructure, including by-passes and inter-urban routes, designed to relieve congestion and ensure the future growth of the Irish economy, the provision of jobs and the future prosperity and well being of the whole country.

Road Safety

Safety on our roads is an every day matter of life and death. Our campaign to make all our roads safer has clearly had a very positive impact.

2008 saw the lowest number of road deaths in this country since records began.

Since 1997 government has implemented robust national road safety strategies and this work is saving lives. In 1972, 640 people were tragically killed on our roads. In 2008 this figure fell to 278 deaths despite the fact that there are now over eight times the number of licensed vehicles and licence holders in the state.

At the very core of making our roads safer is driver responsibility. The introduction of penalty points has made drivers more careful and saved lives. The new provisional licence stipulations introduced in mid 2008 have also delivered a direct and immediate impact on lowering road deaths.

Fianna Fáil will:

- Continue to roll out the many life saving measures contained in the National Roads Safety Strategy (2007-2012);
- Extend the network of speed cameras nationwide at accident black spots and dangerous stretches of road to ensure maximum effectiveness in reducing deaths and injuries on our roads;
- Deliver a register of existing driving instructors and put in place a suitable monitoring mechanism to maintain a high standard.

Tourism

We believe that smaller-scale local provision of tourist facilities can play a major role in the local economy and are committed to market, invest and promote local tourism and the further engagement of local planning structures with this sector.

Local Development

We will focus on creating sustainable communities by incorporating the highest design standards and providing a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of essential infrastructure and services. We will facilitate the development of sustainable communities through more effective planning and the provision of necessary supporting services and amenities:

- We will help achieve the most efficient use of urban land through housing densities that are appropriate to the location involved and availability of supporting services and infrastructure, particularly transport;
- We will set high standards in terms of space and facilities to meet the needs of communities in line with best urban regeneration practice;
- We will endeavour to ensure new residential developments be supported and facilitated by the necessary supporting services and infrastructure. Crucial infrastructure such as education and health facilities, public transport, child-care and community amenities must be set as equally important as the usual hard infrastructure needed like water services and road access;
- We will insist that Development plans, urban local area plans and planning schemes for Strategic Development Zones should underpin the creation of sustainable residential developments;
- We will insist Development plans should include urban design policies which are capable of being expanded in more detail in local area plans;
- We will ensure local authorities should issue design briefs and receive design statements for particularly important, sensitive or large-scale development sites;
- We will insist no substantial residential development should proceed without an assessment of existing schools capacity or the provision of new school facilities in tandem with the development;
- We will insist no substantial residential development should proceed without either adequate existing public transport provision or new public transport provided in tandem with the development;
- We will insist all new developments should prioritise public transport, cycling and walking, and minimise the need to use cars;
- We will pass by-laws to ensure that all new buildings meet best practice for disability access;
- We will work with all relevant stakeholders to address outstanding access issues;
- We will encourage more efficient use of energy and a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

Housing

Housing funding has increased significantly in recent years and a major programme of social housing remains underway. The effective use of this investment will remain a major issue for local authorities in the next five years:

- We will restore balance to the housing market by matching up social housing needs with suitable available unsold housing units;
- We will further expand the sources of social housing supply through the introduction of long term leasing arrangements;
- We will support an ambitious programme to improve energy performance in local authority housing stock;
- Fianna Fáil is committed to providing appropriate Traveller accommodation. We will also improve services to Travellers where the rate of progress so far has been unsatisfactory;
- We will continue to promote the Home Choice loan as a practical and prudent temporary house purchase loan scheme; its potential beneficiaries are households which, in the current economic climate, are unable to obtain sufficient loan finance elsewhere to purchase their homes (and which are required to prove their eligibility with evidence of their inability);
- We will continue to provide funding for the carrying out of essential repairs to houses occupied by elderly persons living on their own under the Special Housing Aid for the Elderly scheme;
- We will continue to adequately resource the Capital Loan and Subsidy Scheme for voluntary housing;
- We will seek to maintain progress towards medium term housing commitments set out under Towards 2016 and the National Development Plan through flexible and imaginative responses to the structuring of our investment programme to maximise the return on public investment;
- We will pursue the use of long term lease arrangements for social housing purposes to supplement traditional local authority construction or acquisition over the coming months;
- We will promote the new single streamlined Government Equity to replace the current approach through which affordable housing is made available under Part V, the 1999 Affordable Housing Scheme and the Affordable Housing Initiative;
- We will review and promote all disability related housing information;
- We will introduce greater equity into the affordable housing system and provide a basis for achieving greater consistency across the schemes and across different areas of the country;
- We will ensure an adequate supply of affordable social and supported housing suited to the broad diversity of needs of people with disabilities.

Homelessness

In cooperation with government departments, the level, range and quality of provision for people who are homeless has improved significantly in recent years.

- We will seek to provide effective long-term solutions for people leaving homelessness, including development of a new scheme of supports and homes through leasing or equivalent accommodation supply arrangements;
- We will seek support for new arrangements and procedures for funding homeless services based on needs, priorities and maximising efficiency, quality and value for money;
- We will work for co-ordination of guidance to local authorities, local homeless fora and health services, particularly in the context of formulation of local homeless action plans.

Water and Waste Water Services

We will continue to ensure priority is attached to investment in water services even in these adverse economic times. We will continue to preserve and protect our water resources as a key priority in environmental policy by vigorously pursuing our programme to meet European Union standards for drinking water.

- We will ensure all local authorities work with the key stakeholders, including the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the EPA and the EU Commission to ensure that the management structures for the supply of drinking water in Ireland are of the highest standard;
- We will support the EPA's recommendation that chlorine monitors and alarms be installed on drinking water supplies;
- We will stress the positive benefits for water suppliers in promoting water conservation and we will ensure that increased focus will be placed on conservation measures in the new Water Services Investment Programme.

Waste Management

- We will continue to ensure adequate funding is made available to Local Authorities towards the continuing development of Ireland's waste recycling infrastructure;
- We will work to ensure each Local Authorities waste management infrastructure and practices reach the highest EU standards;
- We will expand the network of bottle banks, recycling centres and segregated collection and introduce household hazardous waste collection in all suitable recycling centres;
- We will ensure that landfills currently provided for under regional waste management plans should be the last to be constructed for a generation;
- We will seek to drive down the cost of waste management charges to householders and business by ensuring that waste management systems are competitive and use all available technologies to achieve this including the use of waste for generating sustainable electricity;
- We will support community monitoring arrangements of major waste management facilities, including on-line monitoring where appropriate, with specific powers/rights to information;
- We will ensure that flat rates on waste disposal will be abolished and a mandatory system of weight-related charges for waste collection introduced.

RAPID – Disadvantaged Urban Communities

The RAPID Programme is giving local communities in the most disadvantaged urban areas a real voice for change for the better in their own communities. We will ensure that all severely disadvantaged areas that should have RAPID status will be included in the RAPID Programme.

CLÁR - Disadvantaged Rural Communities

Since the start of 2004 some €100million has been provided for local social and physical infrastructure in the CLÁR areas and this has leveraged out almost the same figure in matching funds. In these times of economic constraint, we will focus the CLÁR programme on priority local needs in CLÁR areas.

Litter

Fianna Fáil will continue to resource and implement anti-litter action at local level. We will:

- Step up enforcement of existing legislation on litter, illegal dumping and pollution;
- Encourage greater training for, and greater flexibility in, the litter warden service, including greater targeting of resources at the most serious litter problems;
- Promote greater litter education/awareness in schools;
- Require particular sectors associated with litter polluting products (chewing gum, takeaway foods, drinks containers) to give clear commitments to anti-litter action;
- Promote the Irish Business Against Litter's initiative, the Anti Litter League, which ranks the performance of each local authority in combating litter in a league table format.

Libraries

We will continue to support the development and refurbishment of Public Libraries throughout the country. The last decade has seen a significant increase in the funding for the Library Service. As a result of policies of Fianna Fáil led Government we have more and better library services and buildings than ever, longer opening hours and more services available to the public. Libraries have the potential to become the focus of information provision for jobseekers, employers, users of public services, tourists and many others. Fianna Fáil will seek to realise that potential.

Joint Policing Committees

We will complete the roll-out of the Joint Policing Committees to all local authority areas. These Committees give community leaders, Gardaí and citizens an opportunity to address the crime problems in their communities together.

Apartments

We will shortly introduced legislation to regulate property management companies.

Recreation and Amenities

Local Authorities play a key role as providers of recreation and amenity facilities. The National Lottery and the development levies have helped to provide many facilities in recent years. Planning rules ensuring that crèche/childcare facilities have to be provided in certain new developments has also helped but we must continue to build on this progress.

Fianna Fáil will ensure:

- All developments will include provision for a "community gain" for new and existing residents;
- Provision of scheme to increase the numbers of playgrounds in existing developments and to ensure the provision of a playground as a planning condition of future developments above a certain size;
- Provision of safe walking and cycling routes to schools and local shopping in all new developments;
- Introduce changes in planning law to ensure that a builder cannot apply for planning permission to build extra houses on "green areas" in existing estates after a period of years.

