

"A New Patriotism Locally"

- Fine Gael Manifesto for Local Elections 1999

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Introduction

Ireland's new and welcome prosperity has not been adequately reflected in the services and facilities provided by our Local Authorities. Fine Gael's Local Election candidates will highlight these deficiencies and, when elected, will work to remedy them as quickly as possible.

Housing

This is one of our most basic needs. Yet, the present Government has abjectly failed to keep pace with the demand for housing that arises from an increased rate of household formation. Housing Authority waiting lists are longer than they have ever been. More and more families are obliged to live in over-crowded conditions for longer and longer periods. The funding of the Local Authority Housing Programme has simply not kept pace with the need.

In the private sector, house prices continue to increase. Prices of even modest "starter" homes now exceed the means of many young couples who, up to just a few years ago, could reasonably have expected to buy their own homes. Many such couples are being forced into the private rented sector, or are joining the lengthening queues of people waiting for Local Authority houses.

In rural areas, it is becoming increasingly difficult to get planning permission to build houses on family lands for young people who wish to retain their roots in local communities and to raise their families in their own home areas.

Sanitary Services

Over much of the country, the lack of adequate sewage treatment facilities and drinking water supplies is a real obstacle to development, both of housing and in commercial and industrial

activities. There are still far too many towns in Ireland that do not have adequate sewage treatment facilities to deal with current needs: these towns simply cannot expand without major investment in effluent treatment.

County Roads

County roads in many parts of the country are literally falling apart. There are communities all over the country that are in danger of being deprived of essential services like school bus transport and milk collection, simply because local roads are in such a deplorable state. The County Roads Refurbishment Programme instituted by the Rainbow Coalition Government has not been stepped up to a pace adequate to deal with the extent of the problem. Difficulties in local travel owing to the deterioration of county roads are now creating problems of isolation for many individuals, especially elderly people, and communities in every part of Ireland.

The Local Elections on June 11th will give Irish people an opportunity to express their outrage at the inadequacy of local services and to send a very clear message to the Government that the benefits of our prosperity must be used to avoid a further deterioration in the quality of life over huge parts of our country.

New Patriotism

As we enter the new Millennium, we need to build a New Patriotism for the new realities of life in Ireland.

We have made Ireland a prosperous country. That prosperity, however, is not yet shared by everybody. The New Patriotism means that we should spread the benefits of that prosperity to include all our people.

The prosperity we have built has not benefited all parts of our country equally. The New Patriotism means that we should bring that prosperity to all parts of the country, in ways that suit the needs of different local communities.

The New Patriotism aims to make Ireland a place where our children and their children will want to stay, to live and to bring up their families.

We want that New Patriotism to find an expression and a meaning in Local Government. We want it to make Local Government a vibrant and innovative partner in the life of local communities throughout the country. We want it to make Local Government an effective partner in the life of our nation and not simply a client of our national Government.

A New Mission for Local Government

Fine Gael candidates - both sitting Councillors and new candidates - are committed to making Local Government a vibrant and innovative partner in the life of our communities. We want to strengthen the role of Local Government - County Councils, Corporations, Urban District Councils and Town Commissioners - in promoting social and economic development and in improving the quality of life for our citizens.

We believe that we must strengthen the role of Councillors, elected by the people, in all aspects of the work of Local Authorities and, in particular, in ensuring that physical planning is consistent with sustainable development, the protection of our environment and the enhancement of the quality of life.

We believe that more of the executive powers of local government should be vested in the elected

members. The current concentration of executive powers in the hands of non-elected officials is undemocratic.

We propose that each Local Authority establish a Committee of elected members similar to Dail Eireann's Public Accounts Committee, with the powers necessary to examine in detail and to receive a full accounting of every item of the Authority's expenditure.

We believe that our Constitution should explicitly recognise and provide for the role of Local Authorities in the social and economic life of our people. The present Government's proposal to amend the Constitution in order to give formal recognition to the role of Local Government and to prescribe a maximum period between Local Government elections is long overdue. We believe that, for reasons of convenience, the maximum period should be five years, and that Local Government elections should always coincide with elections to the European Parliament.

Local Authorities and the National Development Plan

Our Local Authorities and the Regional Authorities which group them together must be consulted and involved at all stages of the preparation and implementation of the National Development Plan for the period 2000 to 2006. All of the infrastructural and development projects and activities which will be financed through this Plan will be carried out in the jurisdiction of one or other Local Authority. Each of these projects will have implications for the Local Authority, either in the provision of facilities or in the co-ordination of work on related developments. Co-ordination is necessary to ensure consistency between projects funded through the National Development Plan and the provisions of County Development Plans. The success of the National Development Plan will depend to a significant degree on supporting activities by Local Authorities within the framework of their specific functions. In particular, the success of measures in the National Development Plan to favour integrated rural development will also require co-ordinated action by Local Authorities.

Physical Planning

Rapid economic development, increasing urbanisation and population increases have placed enormous pressures on our planning system. It must now be changed to meet these pressures in an efficient and democratic way.

First, the elected members of planning authorities must be given a far greater role than they currently have, in order to make the planning process democratically accountable. We propose that:

- In addition to having powers in relation to the adoption of County Development Plans, Councillors should be given the power to draw up the regulations and guidelines necessary to implement the provisions of Development Plans in relation to the different categories of planning decisions;
- Planning decisions of certain types or over a certain threshold should be submitted for final decision to elected members of the planning authority; such decisions could include, for example, housing developments of over 50 dwelling units, retail developments over a certain size (with a differentiation between urban and rural areas), industrial activities requiring an EPA licence, major infrastructure projects (including all National Roads Authority projects).

Further, we believe that any planning decision which departs from the recommendations made by technical and planning staff should be fully explained and justified to the elected members of the planning authority and to the public.

Next, pre-planning consultation with the technical staff of planning authorities should be the norm for major planning applications. Such consultations should be open and minuted, and be accessible to the elected members of the planning authority in question.

Planning law should be amended to provide that technical planning matters which have been dealt with and concluded at the initial application or on appeal to An Bord Pleanála cannot be raised again subsequent to any appeal.

Despite its recent strengthening, An Bord Pleanála has proved incapable of dealing with appeals coming before it within the target maximum period of four months, which is already excessively long. We believe that that period should be reduced to two months. It is clear that further resources are needed to prevent the appeal process itself from constituting an unnecessary delay in the planning and development process. In addition, in cases where An Bord Pleanála makes a decision which goes against the advice of its own technical advisers, the motivation of that decision should be fully explained to all interested parties and to the public.

Current building regulations provide for the special access needs of disabled people. In practice, however, the implementation of these regulations by planning authorities is simply not being monitored or enforced. New measures are needed to oblige planning authorities to ensure the implementation of these regulations, and to have regard to the needs of the disabled in streetscape planning.

Since minimum standards tend to become the norm (and therefore also the maximum standards), standards set to meet the needs of people with disabilities (e.g. doorway widths, ramp widths, ramp angles, lift sizes, unobstructed footpath widths, etc.) should be generously drawn in order to ensure a comfortable environment.

Local Authorities must be given clear and unambiguous powers to require public utilities (water service providers, telecommunications companies, energy supply companies) to:

- Put all services underground in urban areas and in any other areas designated by the competent planning authorities,
- Give notice of all schedules of routine installation and maintenance work and of planned development work, so that the competent planning authorities can ensure co-ordination of the necessary work with the minimum inconvenience to the public,
- Carry out all surface restoration work to acceptably high standards to ensure the harmony of streetscapes and to avoid danger to the public.

Planning law currently places a duty on planning authorities to ensure compliance with conditions attached to planning permissions. Many, if not all, planning authorities fail to achieve this. Lax enforcement of planning conditions is commonplace. Two things are needed to remedy this unacceptable state of affairs:

- Local Authorities need more and better qualified personnel to monitor the enforcement of planning conditions, and
- A new culture of commitment to excellence must be implanted and nurtured among Local Authority staff.

There is a need for outline planning frameworks to provide a "fast track" for industrial and commercial development, while respecting the demands of sustainable development. Planning authorities must be given the power and the scope to designate areas for particular types of development, specifying clearly the conditions that apply to such developments, institute rapid-response monitoring and supervision procedures, and thereby make the planning and approval process both more transparent and less time-consuming. Where appropriate, the Environmental Protection Agency should be involved from the beginning in the designation process.

The Environmental Protection Agency itself needs a major reinforcement of its human and technical resources if it is to carry out its mandate to the full. It is abundantly clear that it is not equipped to deal with the pace of development which is both a cause and a result of our rapid economic growth. Deficiencies in the EPA's resources are now becoming a brake on sustainable development.

Waste Management and Disposal

The management and disposal of waste is an enormous and growing problem in Ireland today. The evidence of our failure to come to grips with this problem is all around us. Much of the legislation to deal with such problems as litter, the disposal of toxic waste and the management and disposal of packaging waste is simply not being enforced by Local Authorities, and there is little evidence of any effort on the part of the Government to ensure compliance.

The current scale of landfill dumping is a blight on our landscape, on public health and on the quality of life. No matter how well run they are, landfill dumps always create problems. Current proposals for "super dumps" have rightly given rise to vigorous resistance. Waste management policy must be specifically tailored to reduce recourse to landfill dumping to the unavoidable minimum.

To achieve this, we need a determined and co-ordinated policy covering:

- Separation of waste, ideally at the point of origin;
- Waste minimisation, especially by the reduction of unnecessary packaging;
- Recycling, especially of building rubble, plastics, glass, paper and organic waste;
- A nationally - coordinated programme to convert waste to energy and/or to heat;
- Intensive co-operation between Local Authorities on the disposal of toxic and hazardous waste.

Regional Authorities should be given clear leadership and co-ordination functions in relation to investment in modern waste management techniques, and in ensuring that Local Authorities fulfill their responsibilities in the execution and monitoring of agreed policies.

There must be an immediate examination of the possibilities offered for the acceleration of investment in this area by Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). We need to assess the extent to which, and the conditions under which, private investment on an agreed partnership basis could accelerate investment in this crucial area.

Water Quality Improvement

The improvement of water quality - including water for consumption, ground water and water courses - is one of the cornerstones of environmental policy. Water is vital to every aspect of life. The improvement of water quality necessarily entails measures which will have a beneficial effect on other aspects of our environment.

We need a massive programme of investment in sewerage services and waste water treatment throughout the country. It should be a clear policy objective that all waste water treatment should be brought to the point where waste water can be returned to the ecosystem without causing any risk to the environment or to human health within a reasonable time frame.

In spite of accelerating investment in recent years, we are a long way away from this target.

Many towns in Ireland have effluent treatment systems which are inadequate to meet even current needs. Such inadequacies are a serious danger to public health and an obvious constraint to development. Planning authorities must be given both the powers and the resources to remedy

these serious deficiencies.

The provision of clean drinking water is an essential service. The EPA report on drinking water quality in 1997 showed that:

- 13% of public water supplies exceeded acceptable levels for coliforms
- 36% of group water supply schemes exceeded acceptable levels for coliforms.

Current rates of growth will continue to put pressure on available water supplies. There is a clear need for a high and sustained level of investment to meet the country's needs.

There must be an immediate examination of the possibilities offered for the acceleration of investment in these areas by Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). We need to assess the extent to which, and the conditions under which, private investment on an agreed partnership basis could accelerate investment in this crucial area.

Housing

Fine Gael has published a comprehensive policy document entitled "Affordable Housing for All". In it, we deal with all of the principal issues which need to be addressed to counter the escalation of house prices in recent years. These measures must be implemented immediately if we are to have any hope of reversing a situation in which the cost of home-ownership has gone beyond the reach of huge numbers of people who, up to as recently as five years ago, could reasonably have aspired to own their own homes.

Even without the additional problem posed by the fact that home-ownership has now gone beyond the reach of many people who would traditionally have been home-buyers, Local Authorities are faced with an increasing challenge in providing affordable rented housing for the many people in Irish society who have no other realistic option. More resources are clearly and urgently needed.

We propose the immediate adoption of a target of 10,000 new Local Authority housing starts per annum.

Apart from the problem of resources, however, there are the problems of estate size, design and management.

The large, sprawling Local Authority estate should by now be a thing of the past. Unfortunately, it is not. Local Authority rented housing should be interspersed with other types of housing, both for rental and for purchase. There is room for much greater variety in the design and execution of Local Authority houses and estates. Where there is a demand for Local Authority housing by applicants living outside the main population centres, housing authorities should be encouraged to provide housing locally in order to help to avoid unnecessarily reinforcing the trend towards greater urbanisation.

The concept of design in Local Authority housing should embrace not only the houses and the estates themselves, but also the provision of the necessary amenities and infrastructures and the location of both the estates and the infrastructures. Similar considerations, indeed, apply to private housing developments, particularly at the lower end of the market. It happens far too often, for example, that new housing developments take place without any provision being made to enable local schools to cater for increasing demand. The provision of recreational amenities typically follows housing development only after a lag of many years. Notwithstanding all that we have learned from large - scale housing development in cities and towns around the country, basic shopping facilities are too often lacking even in housing developments where car-ownership levels are low. Again, the provision of public transport frequently lags far behind housing provision. Housing policy should enable maximum use to be made of existing transport links. Where new

areas have to be developed for housing, public transport planning should be integrated into the overall development.

We need a fundamentally new approach to the integration of the physical planning process, by creating a closer link between the work of Local Authorities in the planning area and the work of Government Departments and other national agencies which currently provide related amenities on a totally un-coordinated basis.

The design of housing estates should now be reviewed with an eye to safety for pedestrians, and for children in particular. As far as possible, principal traffic circulation routes should be located at the outside of estates, or at the outside of clusters within estates.

Estate management is a concept which receives far too little attention in Local Authorities. In most existing Local Authority housing estates, there is an abundance of goodwill and energy available to support voluntary effort. To produce results, this fund of goodwill and energy needs leadership, encouragement and a modest level of resources to produce good, popularly supported management practices which can substantially enhance the quality of life for residents. Fine Gael is committed to providing this kind of local leadership.

House prices are now a matter of the gravest concern. Home ownership is now beyond the reach of vocational and professional groups who, until recent years, had a legitimate and realistic aspiration to it. We believe that Local Authorities could help to alleviate this problem by re-instituting the provision of private sites and by now making such sites available to suitable applicants at cost price. We believe that the development of such a scheme on an extensive basis could be financed by a revolving fund, which would be used to maintain a suitable rate of land acquisition and site provision.

Problems persist throughout the country in relation to the finishing of housing estates by builders, and in relation to their compliance with conditions of planning permissions specifying performance of defined tasks at different stages of development. There are many cases where home buyers have had to endure long periods of inconvenience due to failures to install public lighting, footpaths etc. during the course of development of even relatively small estates. Moreover, there are cases all over the country where estates have not been taken in charge by Local Authorities owing to non-performance by the builder of important planning conditions.

The current reliance on the bonding system has proven to be no guarantee of performance. In many cases, the bond is so low that Local Authorities are reluctant to incur the costs of legal proceedings, even where they have a very good prospect of winning the case.

We will propose changes in planning law to impose clearer and more onerous demands on builders to comply with specified duties set out in the conditions attaching to planning permissions.

We will propose more explicit obligations on planning authorities to monitor compliance with planning conditions. In addition, we will propose a right of redress for aggrieved home buyers against both the builder and the planning authority, since those parties both have obligations in the matter.

Home buyers have a right to effective protection in this matter.

Private rented accommodation forms an important part of the housing market. It is clear that Local Authorities have not fully implemented the legislation concerning the registration of such accommodation. This deficiency must be remedied in order to provide the means of ensuring that tenants' interests are properly defended. Furthermore, we believe that there is a need for the introduction of minimum standards for such accommodation.

We propose the establishment of a national network of independent housing information and advice centres. Given the crisis in the Irish housing market, it is absolutely essential that good

information be provided to people who are seeking to buy a home or to rent in the private rented sector. Over the past five years, the information service provided by Threshold has more than doubled in the cities of Dublin, Cork and Galway. This demonstrates that there is a need to provide such an independent service in each Local Authority area.

It is clear that higher housing densities in selected locations will have to form part of our response to the housing crisis. The design of higher density housing units must take account of the needs of persons with disabilities. The particular needs in question include, for example, close vehicular access, general door and corridor widths, ground-floor accommodation, generous internal dimensions of lifts, convenient ramp inclinations, adequate hand-rail provision.

Summary of Fine Gael's Proposals on Housing

- Abolish stamp duty on second-hand houses for first time buyers;
- Increase the first-time buyer's grant;
- Establish a National Housing Commission;
- Establish a Cabinet sub-committee on housing, chaired by the Taoiseach and consisting of the Ministers for the Environment and Local Government, Health and Children, Finance and Social, Community and Family Affairs;
- Transfer the administration of the rental subsidy scheme and the mortgage supplement scheme to Local Authorities;
- Dramatically increase the provision of capital assistance to Local Authorities to allow 10,000 housing starts each year for the next four years and to substantially increase the capital assistance scheme for the voluntary housing sector;
- Encourage Local Authorities to make fully-serviced private sites available to medium or low-income families for house construction; these sites should be available for use under the "Builder under Licence" Scheme, the Shared Equity Scheme and the Affordable Housing Scheme;
- Encourage Local Authorities to favour proposals for the development in rural areas of clusters of houses designed to promote "in depth" development rather than ribbon development;
- Prioritise infrastructure development and the provision of services in order to facilitate housing development in towns and villages outside the main population centres.
- Bring forward a comprehensive national strategy to deal with the issue of homelessness, with the Department of the Environment and Local Government taking overall control for the direction of policy in this area;
- Review the Landlord and Tenant legislation and the 1992 Housing Act so as to increase the rights of tenants and to provide incentives for the private rented sector to develop longer term leases;
- Increase housing density, particularly in areas close to transport corridors, and to ensure a mechanism of enforcement by the Department of the Environment and Local Government on appropriate Local Authorities;
- Introduce legislation ring-fencing development levies for the use of community projects in new developments;

- Complete as a matter of priority an audit of all State-owned lands so as to increase the availability of such lands for social housing;
- Introduce legislation to ban the practice of gazumping.

Accommodation for Travellers

The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 constituted a substantial legislative step forward in this area. We believe that all housing authorities should be asked, at the end of 1999, to give an account of action taken by them to implement the provisions of this Act. Where Local Authorities have failed to act or are being dilatory in meeting the requirements of their area, consideration should be given either to applying suitable sanctions, or the legislation should be modified to enable the Government to enforce compliance.

When we judge that accommodation provided is adequate in relation to the needs, we propose that there should be a review of the legal provisions which prevent Local Authorities from moving traveller communities from unauthorised sites on publicly-owned land unless they have sites on which to re-locate them. If adequate provision is made for accommodation, we believe that there can be no case for unauthorised occupation of publicly-owned land.

Public Transport

The provision of public transport falls outside the remit of Local Authorities. There is, however, a major deficiency in our public transport system to which we believe we should call attention during the Local Elections. It is in the provision of bus transport for people who live outside our larger towns and in areas away from the principal bus routes. For these people, there is simply no public transport. This puts severe limitations on the mobility of those who cannot afford a car, and on those families where the breadwinner needs the family car to get to work. This deficiency is a direct result of Bus Éireann's effective near-monopoly.

We believe that access to the provision of bus services for reward should be opened up to private enterprise, subject to suitable licensing and quality arrangements. In this way, we believe that the quality and amenity of life could be considerably increased throughout the country.

County Roads

Despite the reinforcement of the County Roads Refurbishment Programme initiated by the "Rainbow" Government in 1995, which has continued since then, the maintenance and upgrading of our county roads structure continue to be seriously underfunded. In many parts of the country, the deterioration in the quality of county roads has a marked effect on economic activity and on the quality of life. Services such as postal delivery, milk collection, school transport and public transport are seriously inconvenienced by degraded road structures. There is a clear need for a further increase in the allocation of funding for county road maintenance and upgrading.

Modernising Local Administration

Substantial efforts have been made in recent years to improve the performance of public service in Ireland and to make it more "user-friendly". Regrettably, less progress has been made in this regard in our Local Authorities than in the Civil Service.

The services provided by Local Authorities are essential to the quality of life of our citizens. Information about services, about access to services, about the delivery of services and about the

implications of service provision for individuals and for families should be readily available to every citizen.

We must inculcate a culture of personal service to the citizen in every member of the staff of every Local Authority.

Management structures and systems in Local Authorities are, in many cases, outmoded, cumbersome and slow. They must be reviewed and updated so that Local Authorities can become the vibrant and innovative partners of local communities that we wish them to be.

Many of the services provided by Local Authorities involve personal, face-to-face contact between citizens and officials. While we recognise that the development of "one-stop" centres is a step forward, there is an urgent need for a qualitative improvement in the way that citizens are dealt with. Privacy, courtesy and the identification of the official concerned must become the norms in such contacts.

We call on the Minister for the Environment and Local Government, in conjunction with the General County of County Councils and the Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland, to draw up a model "Local Government Citizens' Charter". This Charter should set out clearly:

- The rights of the citizen in all dealings with Local Government;
- The duties and functions of the Local Authority;
- The obligations of the Local Authority to each citizen in its functional area;
- Standards of service to be guaranteed to the citizen in
 - (a) personal dealings with Local Authority officials,
 - (b) speed of response,
 - (c) completeness of information to be provided,
 - (d) notification of any proposed changes in services to be provided.

Each Local Authority should adopt the Charter with any modifications appropriate to its circumstances, a copy of which should be sent to every resident in its functional area and to every person newly taking up residence in that area.

The range of services provided by Local Authorities affects every aspect of economic life and community activity. Local Authorities should therefore be involved in strategic thinking about economic and social development. They should therefore provide a forum for the development of strategies for

- Agricultural development
- Land use planning
- Industrial development
- Social development

in their functional areas, in conjunction with representative bodies and organisations. In this way, Local Authorities can both inform and be informed by people actively engaged in each of these facets of development. Such involvement would help to realise fully the potential of both Local Authority action and of the economic and social resources of their functional areas.

Conclusion

Fine Gael wants to restore the reality of local Government. More of the decisions that affect the lives of individuals, families and communities should be made at local level and accounted for at local level. Fine Gael candidates in every Local Authority area pledge themselves to bring this about.

ENDS

