

Green Party / Comhaontas Glás

Local Election Manifesto 2014



Contents

- Introduction
- Reforming the Structures
- Funding Local Government
- Planning & Housing
- Environment, Food & Energy
- Local Economies – Strong Communities
- Transport
- Community Health and Wellbeing

Introduction

The Green Party strongly believes in the central role of local government and its ability to be a force for good in people's daily lives. Green Councillors have always acted positively and responsibly to strengthen local democracy and participation, to insist on good planning with community involvement, to protect the local environment, to promote enterprise and sustainable employment, and to hold city and county officials to account. A Green voice on a local council ensures that these issues will not be neglected.

The Green Party believes that strong participative, accountable local government can drive a transformational agenda in sustaining local economies, strengthening environmental protection, tackling climate change, fostering social inclusion and enabling community and voluntary organisations to participate in democratic structures while still maintaining a strong critical voice on behalf of the communities they represent.

The reforms brought about by the current Government under 'Putting People First' are nothing more than a window dressing, an attempt at a populist stroke to retire over a third of elected representatives while simultaneously subsuming local community development processes into local governance, thereby silencing their voices in the cause of 'efficient delivery of services'. Cost savings put out by Government are exaggerated; retiring so many councillors will be costly. There are no proposals to merge County Manager or Director of Services functions across Counties or on a regional basis. In fact, the policy recommendation will be to create a further Director of Services post for Economic Policy Development.

Financing local government has become challenging in recent years. Many Local Authorities are in serious financial crisis, with deficits of millions that are restricting their day to day activities. An over reliance on development charges exposed a deep flaw in how planning was granted to so much inappropriate development while not being financially sustainable as a funding mechanism for local service provision. Now the fund has dried up. While the Local Property Tax (LPT) was promoted by Government as a means of direct financing of Local Government, in reality most revenue generated is going back to Government coffers only to be distributed back to Local Authorities as an Annual Grant.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the Green Party believes that much can be achieved at local level to improve lives every day, and build confidence in the role of local democracy. Green Councillors will work tirelessly, as they have done in the past, to make these improvements a reality.

Reforming the Structures

In Local Government the Green Party will pledge to work towards and advocate for more participative ways of engaging with communities at the earliest possible stage of plans or projects. People should be at the centre of the decision making process.

The Green Party in Local Government will campaign for greater powers to be devolved to local authorities including autonomy in revenue raising and participation of the wider community in the annual budgetary process.

Green Party Councillors will work collaboratively with colleagues from all parties and none towards a common goal of achieving what's best for the common good.

Regional Government

Among the findings of the Mahon Tribunal was a proposal to have a directly elected regional tier of Local Government to replace the current regional authorities made up of selected Councillors from constituent Local Authorities. A directly elected regional authority would strengthen the statutory implementation of Regional Planning Guidelines, the Water Framework Directive, as well as develop regional EU funded projects in energy, transport and nature conservation. The Green Party believes that 'Putting People First' is limited in its ambition to strengthen democratic accountability and fails to recognise regional government as an important layer in a European context. Green Party Councillors will work with colleagues in neighbouring councils on strategic issues like water, waste and transport to demonstrate the power of a regional approach.

Directly Elected Mayors

The Government's decision to give a veto to the councillors the four Dublin local authorities regarding the directly elected Mayor for Dublin is symptomatic of a failure to comprehend the sheer scale of the failure of the current system of annual rotation of the mayoralty between the parties in power. One of Europe's iconic capital cities has no coherent, consistent system of governance. Four separate local authorities follow different and often contradictory approaches to planning, transport and the delivery of public services. European municipalities cannot understand it.

As Environment Minister, John Gormley advanced proposals for a directly elected Mayor of Dublin with added proposals for a roll out in other large urban centres. The current Government has failed to give any substantial leadership on this issue. The people of Dublin should have been given the right to give their view on the matter through a plebiscite this May.

The Green Party has initiated a petition to direct Minister for the Environment to put the proposal to the people of Dublin, despite the veto by councillors on Fingal County

Council. After the local elections, Green Party councillors on the four local authorities in Dublin will continue to fight for the creation of a directly elected mayor, following a vote of the public.

Changing the Culture

The Green Party will advocate for a radical change in Members allowances, ending the 'conference culture' within Local Government in favour of mandatory accredited training for all elected reps in areas of competency and responsibility related to their position.

Holding the executive members to account

While the provisions of the Local Government Act, 2014 allowing the elected representatives of a local authority vote to suspend or remove a chief executive, are welcomed, the Green Party believes that councillors should have wider powers to hold the executive of local authorities to account for poor performance, misappropriation etc.

Letting communities decide

Local referendums can be an excellent way to involve people in deciding what happens in their communities. For major projects, such as transport infrastructure and redevelopments, locals should have the option of petitioning for a referendum. The area in question could be Council level or lower, and safeguards would be put in place to ensure adequate participation and transparency.

Local Community Development and Social Inclusion

'Putting People First', the document underpinning Government's approach to Local Government Reform advocates a more 'streamlined' delivery of local community development. It is the view of the Green Party that it erodes further the autonomy of community development structures; structures that were undermined by the 'Cohesion' process of 2008/9 which brought about the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP). This programme was implemented by Partnership Companies. This process led to much resentment among the sector due to lack of consultation.

Furthermore the abolition of Combat Poverty Agency (CPA), the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), the Equality Authority and the Community Workers Cooperative (CWC) has removed the critical advocacy, policy making and analysis of government policy in relation to community development. This at a time when that voice was needed most in Irish Society.

Government argues that 'local government will be the main vehicle of governance and public services at local level-leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and communities effectively and accountably' (Putting People First).

The process of alignment of structures into a single Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) will have profound effects on how communities relationship with local government. LCDC's will have power to coordinate, govern, plan and oversee all publically funded interventions at a local level. It may also lead to a tendering process for the delivery of certain plans and programmes across community development sectors.

The Green Party is concerned that this will lead to a politicisation of community development, with limited opportunities for participation and little adherence to the principles of Local Agenda 21; the blueprint for grassroots engagement at community level.

The Green Party will ensure that local authorities facilitate informal, voluntary community assemblies within local areas to provide greater community involvement in neighbourhood development.

Financing Local Government

The Green Party has always supported giving local authorities their own revenue raising powers as a way of increasing their accountability and ensuring that money raised locally is spent locally. The manner in which the Government has implemented the Property Tax has completely undermined this. The Property tax takes no account of ability to pay and fails to promote good usage of land.

The Green Party has always favoured a site value tax on all land excluding agricultural land. This looks at the value of the actual land itself, not including the value of any building (i.e. house) or improvement that has been made to it. Such a tax is not subject to the fluctuations of the property market. It also acts as an incentive to those who own high value sites (such as inner city sites) but who fail to develop them.

The current Property Tax should be replaced with this more efficient site value tax model, along with protections for those on fixed incomes and taking account of large stamp duties paid during the boom years.

The Green Party advocates the piloting of Participatory Budgeting processes in all Local Authorities across the country. This is where communities make the decisions on the allocation of certain amounts of public funds. It has been proven worldwide to be an unparalleled tool in increasing accountability, transparency and social and democratic inclusion in small and very large communities. Durham County Council in the UK has facilitated the participation of over 10,000 people in Participatory Budgeting events. Durham has recently held 13 such events with on average £40,000 of public money been allocated by the public at each event, with an average attendance of 800 per meeting.

The increased powers of Local Authorities over the rate of property tax needs to be counterbalanced with an increased say in decision making on this revenue stream for the public. It is the ideal time to start Participatory Budgeting processes.

Planning & Housing

The Housing Agency predicts that just short of 80,000 new housing units will be needed across the country between this year and 2018. 47% of this will be required in the Dublin region. It is essential that the country does not make the same mistakes in the provision of housing that were made during the Celtic Tiger years. All Green Party councillors will approach the issue of zoning for housing on the basis of:

- Suitability of Density
- Quality of Housing
- Provision of social & transport infrastructure
- Housing mix

The recent housing bubble provides ample justification for taking the provision of housing out of the exclusive control of speculators, by giving local authorities a central role in building to meet the needs of the population generally. Public housing need not be restricted to those on low incomes – a stock of high quality public units made available at market rates can help stabilise the rental market as well as achieving a better social mix.

Social Housing

Social housing should be placed at the centre of local authority housing service plans to ensure availability of a sufficient number of homes to clear waiting lists. As of December 2013, the Housing Agency estimates that almost 90,000 people are on a social housing waiting list across the country.

Green Party councillors will work with NAMA and the approved housing agencies to tackle this major crisis in social housing. We will support innovative mechanisms to release funding for housing construction. We will oppose any attempts to dilute the social housing obligations under Part V of the Planning Act, 2000.

Private Rented Accommodation

A large proportion of the housing list is made up of people who are currently in private rented accommodation, but who are defined as being in housing need due to the cost, unsuitability, or uncertainty of their tenure. For this reason guaranteeing tenants' rights is a logical step towards reducing housing lists,

providing existing private tenants with similar stability to that which is available in local authority housing.

The Green Party will advocate for a stronger enforcement role for Local Authorities in monitoring and addressing anti social behaviour in private rented dwellings by making landlords more accountable for the behaviour of their tenants. This can be achieved in association with a strengthened Private Residents Tenancy Board (PRTB).

Planning Better Communities

Green Party Councillors will insist on more efficient use of public resources and a more transparent planning system. We need to redesign communities to deliver a better quality of life in accommodation, travel, access to essential services and community facilities. New development should be made conditional on targeted funding of community facilities especially schools.

We aim to end the developer led-approach to planning which ignores social, economic, environmental consequences of rising transport dependence and energy consumption. The focus of residential planning should be on the creation of long term sustainable communities with priority on community facilities prior to building houses. Climate change must be incorporated into all local authority planning decisions.

Better Public Space, Green Space and Play Space

All development plans should include specific details of how public space and green space will be increased and enhanced over the course of the plan's lifetime. Green Party Councillors will make the provision and enhancement of green spaces a priority. They will also support the designation of important green spaces for protection under the planning system.

Children of all ages have the right to play and recreation under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This right is not available to too many of our young people because we are failing to provide suitable public spaces and facilities. We need structured partnerships between local authorities and youth groups and youth workers to make these spaces available.

Public Participation and Information

While the Irish Government finally transposed the Aarhus Convention into Irish Law in September 2012, there is little to inspire confidence that Aarhus will be taken seriously by Irish public authorities or that Local Authorities will be resourced or trained to meet the demands of the convention.

<http://www.environ.ie/en/Environment/AarhusConvention/AarhusFAQs/>

Aarhus has wide ranging implications for Local Authorities and yet many staff officers have never even heard of it.

The three main pillars of Aarhus are; Access to Information on the Environment, Public Participation within decision making processes concerning environmental matters and Access to Justice on environmental issues that is timely and not prohibitively expensive. Every local authority should have a designated legal officer to assist and advise the public in vindicating these rights.

The Green Party is concerned that history will repeat itself as our economy begins to recover. The big two parties are showing signs right across the country that they are ready to engage in the same destructive practices of reckless zoning and pushing through developments that will damage quality of life, harm habitats, and cause environmental degradation. The flaws in the public consultation process that has taken place in the development of new Eirgrid projects and in the establishment of Irish Water show that we do not have the right consultation process in place. We can and must do things differently.

There is extensive research showing that a range of deliberative processes are available to achieve better citizen engagement and community involvement in decision-making. Green Councillors will ensure that these processes are put into practice in all local authorities.

Environment, Food & Energy

Transition to a low carbon green economy and society begins at a local level. Local Authorities are well placed to facilitate this change through planning policy and the operation of their services

The Green Party will work to develop Local Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Plans to help Local Authorities and communities to cope with extreme weather events and to offset the worst impacts of those events in the long term.

The Green Party will work collaboratively towards developing Local Energy Descent Action Plans to decarbonise our local economies and communities, move towards local sources of renewable energy, develop sustainable local markets for wood fuel and biomass, promote an enhanced retrofit programme with SEAI, and to reduce energy costs for business and the public sector.

The Green Party will work towards upholding community development principles of advocacy, action and activation within the constraints of the new local government structures in order that CDP's, FRC's and all community development groups retain a radical voice and are resourced adequately to participate fully in local decision making.

The Green Party will advocate for increased funding for the arts and library services across Local Authorities including a substantial fund for community arts grants.

The Green Party will work to ensure that all local authorities have Heritage and Conservation Officers and have in place five year heritage and biodiversity plans which will be implemented by a broadly representative heritage forum under the auspice of the newly formed Social and Economic Committee's (SEC's). Currently several Counties do not have heritage or conservation officers.

The Green Party advocate for a broad sectoral approach to community mental health led by Social and Economic Committees (SEC's) which will include all stakeholders and work collaboratively towards creating healthy communities using the Healthy Cities initiative, creative planning, and ensuring that local mental health initiatives are supported. Better spatial planning, including

landscaping, ecological building design, and provision of parks and play spaces can contribute positively towards the mental health of a whole community.

Food

The Green Party will help initiate and support the development of Food Policy Councils across the country. Our food systems are crucial to our local economies, our health and our environment. Food Policy Councils can bring various stakeholders together to develop our food systems in a more planned and sustainable manner that puts health, local communities and environmental protection at its core.

The Green Party will support more organic and local food production and encourage local authorities to support community gardens, allotments, urban vegetable growing (in order to reduce transportation, provide local employment, and strengthen links between producers and consumers). Councils should also facilitate the creation of 'shared gardens', where people with unused gardens are willing to temporarily give it away in return for a share of what is grown. This can also bring communities and different generations together.

Energy

Energy supply must move from carbon to new and clean sources to tackle climate change, to reduce our dependence on imported fossil fuels, to save money, create jobs, lower production costs, enhance energy and food security.

Renewable energy must also be built from the bottom-up, and the benefits must be apparent to everyone. County and City Councils should have the option of establishing their own renewable energy co-operatives, with members of the Council serving on its board. Such co-operatives could establish suitable renewable energy sources and reinvest profits earned within the County, National guidelines would be used to ensure only suitable projects are pursued.

Between 2004 and 2009 Green Councillors led the way in adopting local energy efficiency standards for buildings and these improvements were later taken up at national level. Green Councillors will promote the phased introduction of passive housing standards for all new builds, as the Brussels Region is doing from 2015. Passive housing uses minimal amounts of energy and can have tremendous benefits for owners.

Green Party Councillors will ensure that local authorities lead the way by conducting energy audits and introducing greater energy conservation in public buildings.

Local Economies - Jobs that Last

The new structures of local government provide an opportunity to put greater emphasis on economic development. Not necessarily around County Councils competing with other councils to attract IDA or Enterprise Ireland inward investment but to strengthen local economic activity by supporting SMEs and fostering a culture of local entrepreneurial activity.

Local Authorities too are among the biggest procurers of goods and services in the public sector. By 'greening' public procurement policy, goods and services can be purchased locally, favouring local materials for public projects that are less carbon intensive, using local contractors, low carbon cement, FSC certified timber. Life Cycle Analysis should be embedded in all local Authority projects to ensure the most efficient use of resources and the lowest possible overall carbon emissions.

Local Authorities can lead the way in decarbonising economic activity, transitioning communities towards less intensive energy use and powering our workplaces and homes from entirely renewable, locally sourced energy.

Each Council should be responsible for establishing one or more "Repair Cafes". These would be spaces where unemployed people could learn new skills such as repairing electronics and where members of the public could bring household goods to be repaired. This creates jobs, saves people money and helps reduce waste.

Urban regeneration projects focused on bringing life back into our town centres will provide local employment, re-skill construction workers towards traditional building skills (eg. Kilkenny) and tackle the housing crisis. The 'Living Cities' initiative could be expanded and enhanced to support restoration of vernacular built heritage; shop fronts, timber sash windows, stone masonry etc and a national programme of "Living Above The Shop" where premises are restored to a high level of thermal comfort could transform our regional towns in particular.

Local Authorities should lead in promoting ethical purchasing, buying local and buying green and could explore partnership arrangements for local trading systems. This would keep money circulating in a local economy.

County and City Retail strategies should be radically overhauled to ensure that town centres are protected from further edge or out of town development. Levies

should be introduced on free surface car parks on edge of town sites and the funds raised could be used for protecting and enhancing town centres or subventing local public transport services.

Every urban area should have a well developed farmers market. Local Authorities as the licensing authority via Casual Trading Act have a significant role to play in ensuring that markets are well regulated, supply at least 50% local produce, are well located and are branded and supported to develop. It is well documented that market days can give a boost to all local trade.

Transport

The Green Party believes that more control over transport needs to be given to local authorities within the context of a national transport policy.

Cycling

The Green Party has contributed very significantly to the growth of cycling in Ireland. But there is much further to go. Many of our short local car journeys can be substituted by Greener alternatives. Cycling will play a key role in this change. The Green Party will push for the appointment of Cycling Officers in Local Authorities across the country. There are huge economic, health, and tourism benefits to be gained from a proper set of cycling incentives and a proper cycling infrastructure.

Safe Routes to School

The An Taisce Green Flag scheme has helped promote the idea of children walking and cycling to school where possible. The Green Party will seek to have a Safe Routes to School policy written into the development plan of each local authority. We would seek the establishment of a Safe Routes Committee, which would draw parents, teachers, Gardai and the elected representatives together to identify traffic issues surrounding each primary and secondary school in the local authority and seek means to resolve them.

Transport Consultation Committees

The Green Party wants to see local authorities engage in direct and improved consultation with public and private transport providers in their area. We would seek the establishment of Transport Consultation Committees, bringing transport providers together with the elected representatives.

Community Health and Wellbeing

The Green Party advocate for a broad sectoral approach to community mental health led by Social and Economic Committees (SEC's) which will include all stakeholders and work collaboratively towards creating healthy communities using the Healthy Cities initiative, creative planning, and ensuring that local mental health initiatives are supported. Better spatial planning, including landscaping, ecological building design, and provision of parks and play spaces can contribute positively towards the mental health of a whole community.

The Green Party advocates for the development of a Community Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Strategy in every County. The process of developing such a plan would be led by the LCDC's in collaboration with relevant agencies, the community and voluntary sector and other relevant groupings. Recognising that collaborative action is needed to strengthen community resilience; particularly among vulnerable groups; young men, ethnic minorities, members of the Travelling Community, etc. Local Authorities can play a key role through better spatial planning, provision of community facilities, addressing issues of rural isolation and enhancing community participation.

The Green Party supports the objectives of the Alzheimer Society in ensuring that Local Government should play a strong role in making urban and rural areas 'Dementia Friendly Communities' through the new Public Participation Networks (PPN's) and in all spatial and community planning. This would ensure that villages, towns and cities can become better places to live for people with dementia and their families.

The Green Party supports in full the Local Election Manifesto of the Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) and its three grounding principles of enabling participation in local decision making for people with disabilities, improving access to mainstream public services and supports and recognising that Local Government should be guided by the National Disability Strategy Implementation Plan and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The Green Party advocates a broader role for Local Authorities in addressing substance misuse. The Local Drugs Task Force (LTDF) should be brought under the remit of Local Government and be given a more interactive role with other structures; Policing Committees, Planning Policy Committees and Social and

Economic Committees (SEC's). LTDF's should be resourced to carry out awareness and community based recovery, employment/training programmes.

By integrating policies such as 'Smarter Travel', modal shift towards cycling and walking and planning for better infrastructure, coupled with policies on growing urban food, working with Age Friendly Cities, and Recreation and Sports partnerships, Local Authorities can lead the way towards enhancing the health of communities. Local Authorities should also introduce planning limits on fast food outlets (particularly in the vicinity of schools) and off licences.