



South-East Regional Authority

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Consultation Process on Local Government Reform

A Response to the Green Paper

**Submission
to the Department of the Environment,
Heritage and Local Government**

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Introduction

The South-East Regional Authority (SERA) welcomes the publication of the Green Paper on Local Government Reform and is pleased that the Department is providing, as part of this process, a period to allow opinions to be expressed on the Green Paper.

The SERA made a submission on the initial consultation process (copy herewith) and now wishes to reiterate some of the points made therein.

The SERA envisages the need for regional government to be apportioned a greater role in any reform of local government; this is not reflected in the Green Paper.

The initial submission of the SERA to the preparation of the Green Paper details the considerable limitations, restrictions and inhibitions on the capacity of Regional Authorities to play a full roll in the socio-economic development of their regions. Regional Authorities have not been given a 'General Competence' as in the case of local authorities under the provisions of the Local Government Act, 2001. This omission should be rectified in the reform.

One of the main challenges ahead is to ensure that local government is capable of rising to the challenge of developing and facilitating the development of the Gateway and Hub cities and towns as envisaged by the National Spatial Strategy. This poses a challenge for local authorities in cases where they must cooperate and compete across local authority boundaries. The Green Paper poses the question as to whether new structures are needed in key locations to drive regional growth. Regional Authorities are existing statutory bodies fully capable of coordinating regional growth in a sustainable way. They are well placed to enhance the potential of the gateway cities and towns to offer a real counter-balance to the growth of the Dublin region.

Regional Authorities are well placed to work across boundary areas; the Atlantic Gateways Project is a prime example of a partnership project that combined the development potential of Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. The SERPANT (South-East Regional Public Access Network of Telecommunications) Project that built Broadband MANs in 11 cities and towns in the South-East was coordinated and managed by the SERA and crossed city and town boundaries. Another more recent initiative carried out by the SERA, working with the Mid-West Regional Authority and the six local authorities through whose functional areas the route passes, was the preparation of a N24 Prioritisation Study – the route forms the key east-west transport corridor for the two regions linking the two NSS Gateway cities of Waterford and Limerick.

Recommendations

The reform of the Local Government sector provides the means and opportunity to enhance the role and functions of Regional Authorities. The following recommendations are made with a view to clarifying, removing doubts about and strengthening the powers and functions of Regional Authorities and to improve their capacity to fulfil their potential and play a more proactive role in advancing the economic, social and cultural well-being of their regions. The recommendations recognise that the NUTS III regional level offers an ideal, established territorial basis for better integration of policies and strategies in certain areas and that Regional Authorities are well placed to coordinate public service provision. They are also intended to enable the Regional Authorities to act for local authorities in the performance of specific tasks and functions where formally requested to do so and in accordance with agreed arrangements.

1. The powers and functions of Regional Authorities need to be reviewed to consider in what areas and what additional functions can and should be assigned to them. These could include functions in areas such as:

- Waste Management
- Climate Change
- Renewable/Sustainable Energy
- Regional Transport Initiatives
- Regional Enterprise/Entrepreneurial Support
- Regional Innovation and Research & Development
- Policy areas where the regional level is more appropriate and efficient one.

2. Confer Statutory Authority on Regional Authorities to enter into Agreements with local authorities (and other authorities) to enable them to undertake/perform functions on their behalf, similar to the powers of local authorities under Section 85 of the Local Government Act, 2001

3. Confer a statutory general competence on Regional Authorities to widen their scope for action, similar to that conferred on local authorities under Sections 63 and 65 of the Local Government Act, 2001.

4. Formal statutory designation of the NUTS III regional authority areas as the 'regional level' to effectively achieve vertical and horizontal integration and coordination of services, strategies and policies.

5. Full membership of all sectoral monitoring and evaluation committees.

6. To use the Regional Authority structure for the local democratic input into the HSE as the members of Regional Authorities are all nominated by the constituent County/City Authorities and as functional areas of the authorities generally coincide with the boundaries of the now abolished Health Boards.
7. Financing of Regional Authorities must be given consideration in the White Paper if the role of this tier of government is to be fully realised.
8. More responsibility and power to be extended to the Elected Members in relation to planning matters.

Furthermore, in order to achieve economies of scale there is good scope for cooperation across boundaries in certain operational areas on a regional basis. In terms of the proposed sharing of services between local authorities (HR systems, procurement etc.) there is potential to organise many of these services on a regional basis.

Conclusion

The Green Paper acknowledges the need for better arrangements for regional coordination. It acknowledges that without operational responsibilities, a direct electoral mandate or strong statute backed powers, regional authorities face enduring challenges in establishing a strong coordinating regional voice. While they perform a valuable function by creating a democratic forum for dialogue on a regional basis, there is a clear need for a greater devolution of powers and functions to Regional Authorities.

Regional Authorities must be given responsibility and strong statutory backed powers in order to fulfil their coordinating regional voice.

The Authority welcomes the opportunity to make this contribution to the consultation process and requests that the views contained herein be considered and taken into account, where appropriate.

The Authority would also welcome any further opportunity to elaborate on the views expressed herein in advance of the publication of the White Paper.