

Review of Public Administration

(Information Briefing Paper)

Local Government Representation

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This is a short factual paper which considers the representational levels of local government elected representatives across Europe, but with a particular focus on the Celtic fringe – Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and a comparison with the Republic of Ireland. The data presented here are drawn from several sources¹ and are preceded by a short overview of local government in these jurisdictions.

2. Local government – an overview

- 2.1 Local government in the Republic of Ireland comprises 29 county councils, 5 county borough corporations, 5 borough corporations, 49 urban district councils and 30 boards of town commissioners. The principal services of local government are divided amongst eight programme headings: housing and building; road transportation and safety; water supply and sewage; development incentives and controls; environmental protection; recreation and amenities; agriculture, education, health and welfare; and miscellaneous services. Of interest in the context of a Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland is the recently passed Local Government Act 2001 (RoI). The central aims of Act are to: enhance the role of the elected member, support local interests' involvement with local authority policy making, modernise local government legislation and assist in the programme of local government renewal. It proposes *inter alia* to introduce the position of directly elected mayor and to rationalise the existing borough corporations, urban district councils and boards of town commissioners into one category, to be known as town councils. It also intends to establish an independent local government commission to deal with boundary changes and electoral reviews.
- 2.2 Wales has 22 unitary authorities with responsibility for principal functions such as education, housing, social services, highways, strategic planning, leisure, waste collection/disposal and environmental health. There is also some form of joint provision of services such as the three fire authorities for Wales and a number of area committees with service responsibilities. Unitary authorities range in size from Merthyr Tydfil County Borough with a population of 57,300 to Cardiff County Council with a population of 315,000. In Wales there are some 900 'communities', about 750 of which have established community councils, comparable to English parishes.
- 2.3 Scotland has 32 unitary authorities responsible for the same principal functions as Wales. In establishing unitary authorities it was recognised that some would not be able to provide police and fire services on their own, leading to the creation of joint boards for these and other services. Unitary authorities on mainland Scotland range from Clackmannanshire with a

¹ The data and narrative are drawn directly from, or informed by, the following:
Wilson, D. and Game, C. (2002) *Local Government in the United Kingdom* (3rd ed.). London: Palgrave.
Council of European Municipalities and Regions.
EU Committee of the Regions.
National Statistics Office (London).
Institute of Public Administration (Dublin).

population of approximately 46,700 to the City of Glasgow with 618,400. Scotland is also divided into communities, but Scottish community councils are not local authorities, as they have no statutory basis, and neither the power to tax nor any access, as of right, to public funds.

2.4 Northern Ireland has 26 district councils with responsibility for minor functional areas such as environmental services (e.g. street cleaning, refuse collection and disposal, environmental health), regulatory services (e.g. building control) and leisure services. It is an emasculated form of local government established under the Local Government Act (NI) 1972. Key functions of local government in other parts of the United Kingdom such as education, housing and social services are carried out by appointed area boards. Councils range from Moyle with a population of 15,400 to Belfast City Council which has 281,700 inhabitants.

TABLE 1: REPRESENTATION – LOCAL GOVERNMENT

	Number of Councillors	Population (000)	Number of Councils	Average population per council	Population per elected member	Local government electors per member
Northern Ireland	582	1,698	26	64,980	2,903	2,059
Scotland	1,245	5,115	32	153,000	4,108	3,201
Wales	1,273	2,946	22	128,000	2,314	1,761
Republic of Ireland	1,627	3,839	118	33,000	2,336	1,654

2.5 Representation levels are shown for these 4 jurisdictions in table 1. In both Scotland and Wales the reorganisation of local government halved the number of councils. In April 1996, 22 new Welsh unitary authorities replaced the existing 45 councils, and in Scotland 32 single tier authorities replaced the existing 65 authorities. These fewer elected councils inevitably cover larger areas than the former districts they replaced and have far fewer councillors. England's reorganisation of local government (1995-98) produced the same effect, though to a lesser scale: a reduction of less than 6% in the number of councils, and more than a quarter in the number of councillors. The outcome of this is that the United Kingdom has, on average, the largest local authorities and the highest ratios of citizens to elected councillors of any country in Western Europe.

3. Lessons for Northern Ireland?

- 3.1 There are two possible responses to these data. The first is that the streamlining of local government represents a gradual deterioration in terms of its ‘closeness to the people’ to such an extent that local democracy is being threatened at worse or, at least, there is a democratic deficit. This view is expressed by Jones and Stewart² who argue that ‘a greater number of members embeds local government into the grassroots. They make local government more responsive to the local community and understanding of its wishes and needs’.
- 3.2 The second alternative response is that, given the advent of a fragmented form of local governance (through joint boards, joint committees, contractual arrangements with other providers, and quangos) in which councillors have a less operational role, it could be argued that it is not unreasonable for there to be fewer councillors. Wilson³, for example, poses the question: ‘is it not a more pressing priority to search for new forms of accountability for those non-elected bodies which are delivering services at local level, rather than simply lamenting the demise of an often idealised directly-elected element?’ The salience of this debate in the context of Northern Ireland is that compared to the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, current levels of councillor representation (per capita) are not out of line. In terms of the wider European scene, councils throughout the United Kingdom are larger with higher councillor representation ratios – this includes Northern Ireland (see table 2).
- 3.3 Notwithstanding the comparisons with our European counterparts, the average population of councils in Great Britain is 128,000 people. On a crude calculation this would suggest some **13 councils** for Northern Ireland (half its current number). There is, however, a danger with such numerical simplicity in that it reduces the opportunities for a debate on the future role of local government and puts considerations of ‘form’ before ‘functions’ in any discussions. It also ignores our particular political circumstances, the legacy of the role played by councils beyond their direct provider functions, and future relationship between the devolved Assembly and local government. None of these should be reduced solely to a calculation on comparative size, although it is a useful contribution to the wider debate.

² Jones, G. and Stewart, J. (1993) ‘When numbers don’t add up to democracy’ *Local Government Chronicle* 8th January: 15.

³ Wilson, D. (2000) ‘New Labour, New Local Governance’ in R. Pyper and L. Robins (eds.) *United Kingdom Governance*. London: Macmillan.

TABLE 2: EUROPEAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

	Population (million)	No. of principal local councils	Average population per council	Average size of council	Population per elected member
France	59.6	36,700 communes	1,600	14	118
Austria	8.2	2,350 Gemeinden	3,500	17	209
Sweden	8.8	310 kommuner, etc	28,400	111 ⁴	256
Germany	83.0	15,300 Gemeinden etc	5,400	15	350
Norway	4.5	435 kommuner	10,300	28	367
Finland	5.2	452 kommuner	11,500	28	410
Italy	57.7	8,100 communi	7,100	12	608
Spain	40.0	8,100 municipios	4,900	8	610
Belgium	10.3	589 communes	17,500	22	811
Greece	10.6	1,033 dimi, koinotites	10,300	10	1,075
Denmark	5.4	275 kommuner	19,600	17	1,115
Portugal	10.1	308 municipios	32,800	29	1,131
Netherlands	16.0	548 gemeenten	29,000	19	1,555
Ireland	3.8	118 counties, etc	33,000	14	2,336
United Kingdom	59.6	468 counties, districts etc	127,350	49	2,603

⁴ Includes deputies, elected at the same time.