

## A Directly Elected Mayor Has Appeal



The prospect of directly elected Mayors in Waterford, in addition to our four other major cities, represents a welcome step in the right direction.

But it is clear that the development, revealed by Ferrybank-based TD John Paul Phelan, requires a great deal of tweaking if such an office is to possess executive heft and clear strengthening of local democracy. Minister Phelan's statement refers to a directly elected Mayor, which may well be contested in tandem with next May's local elections, as having "executive functions".

It adds: "Directly elected mayors, without additional functions (would be) based on the current role performed by Cathaoirleach/Mayors/Lord Mayors of local authorities, and

Executive Mayors, whose functions would include both existing Cathaoirleach/Mayor functions and executive functions currently residing with the chief executives of local authorities (could) be either elected directly by the electorate or indirectly from among the elected members of the Council."

This development is included in a government policy discussion paper prepared by Minister Phelan, which was part of the negotiated Programme for Government as a potential measure "to boost local government and accountability".

The Monday morning statement added: "Executive mayors, either directly or indirectly elected, could be put in place in Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. The Government has agreed that the decision to establish the role of a directly elected executive mayor could rest with the electorate of the local authority through a plebiscite in each area."

What we do not yet know is where the direct election of a Mayor would leave the existing offices of both City & County Mayor and Metropolitan Mayor, but given that a new office would not have additional functions, then what could such an office holder actually do? It's worth pointing out that the Minister's discussion paper states that: "Further detailed proposals on the plebiscites and the questions to be put to the electorate, as well as the specific powers to be given to executive mayors are to be brought to Government in the coming months."

So, as of now, we simply do not know what would distinguish a directly elected Mayor from the existing office holder(s) so it's important to avoid any rush to judgement on a proposal which is, at the very least, worthy of a debate.

But if such an office does not come with a substantial budget and executive function, scepticism about a further amendment to local government will be difficult to discard.

Under the current system, the Mayoralty is divvied out via post-election pact discussions, with no drama whatsoever arising every 12 months when the chain passes from one pact member to another.

A Mayor gets a year in office (less than a year in the case of both Declan Doocey and Joe Kelly due to next May's election) and is just settling into the role by the time he or she has to relinquish it. That, from this juncture, feels deeply dissatisfying and not conducive to creating and sustaining a Mayoral-led agenda, be it on the economy, crime or other pressing social matters.

A directly elected Mayor, just like a Technological University (see 'Keyes Side' next to this leader) will be worth pursuing if the brief is adequately budgeted. So our call to Minister Phelan is simple: show us the money.