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CKM12 MRes

Local diversity: a cause for suspicion?

Autonomy and cultural provision in Irish local government – a case study of Cork City Council

A Thesis submitted to the National University of Ireland in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters by Research, Government and Politics

by

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"For central government is local diversity a cause for suspicion?"

Tom Barrington, respected author on Irish local government

Local autonomy is "the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population".

European Charter of Local Self-Government

"The less freedom of judgement is granted to men, the further are they removed from the most natural state and consequently the more repressive the regime".

Baruch Spinoza

"The lock, stock, and barrel of it all is the county council".

Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*

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Introduction

In this thesis I pose, and seek to answer, the question of whether or not the degree of autonomy in Irish local government has an impact on the range and quality of cultural provision enjoyed by Irish citizens.

This question is important as local government touches the lives and livelihoods of every citizen in Ireland, and to quote Wolman and Goldsmith (1990), "different degrees of local autonomy have consequences for […] local accountability, local democracy or even the well-being of citizens".

To answer this question, I first survey the literature on local government, looking at the theory of local government, the principle of subsidiarity, and local government functions in general, with a special focus on cultural services. As will be seen in chapter 1, (see p.36), this piece of research establishes that there is a distinct absence in the literature regarding what impact, if any, local autonomy, or the lack of it, has on the delivery of services, particularly cultural services. This absence emphasises the need for research in this area of interest.

The methodology used in the various stages of the research is outlined in chapter 2. My four decades of working in local government cultural services informs the context of Irish local government as outlined in chapter 3.

Reading the literature disclosed that a paper by Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016) was germane to the research question as it provides an objective framework to measure autonomy. It is necessary, however, to test the findings it provides in respect of Irish local government against the experience and insights of a range of senior officials in local government and cultural venues. This was done through interviews with these officials.

The interviews were structured to align with the framework provided by Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016). I then analyse the findings of the interviews in the context of that framework.

These two elements in chapter 4, when considered together, provide new and original data on the topic addressed by the research question. The objective international data provided by Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim's (2016) framework shows Ireland in an unfavourable light, as will be seen in chapter 4. The case study of Cork City Council, using close analysis of that framework, discloses what impact the low degree of local autonomy has on the provision of services, particularly cultural services. As far as can be established there has been no previous research using the Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016) framework to review local autonomy in Ireland. Similarly, there has been no research carried out on the impact of existing levels of autonomy in Irish local government, which draws on the experiences and insights of practitioners. Chapter 4 thus answers the research question posed by this thesis.

While this research contributes to our knowledge of Irish local government, it is clear that more research needs to be done in this area. Therefore, in chapter 5, I set out some conclusions which might be drawn from the research, and sketch what might be done to address the gaps in our knowledge of Irish local government.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the literature on local government, focusing on a number of specific aspects. The thesis poses the question 'does the lack of autonomy in Irish local government have an impact on the delivery of cultural services?' To help answer this question particular attention has been paid to journal articles and monographs on topics such as local government theory, the role and functions of local government, and the principle of subsidiarity in local government, in Europe and elsewhere – the largest segment of the review.

The published literature on the provision of cultural services by local government entities is then reviewed. The final section discusses the literature on local government in a comparative context, i.e. the levels of autonomy which are the norm in a range of European states, especially states of similar size and population to Ireland.

The Irish state is a signatory to the European Charter of Local Self Government but it has often been argued that Ireland has never sought to abide by the underlying philosophy of the Charter, that of subsidiarity (see for example Callanan, 2018). Subsidiarity means, in essence, "local authorities . . . possessing a wide degree of autonomy with regard to their responsibilities" (European Charter of Local Self Government, 1985, Preamble). This literature review seeks to establish, among other things, whether or not Irish local government does abide by the spirit of subsidiarity.

1.2 Local government theory

Local government theory is concerned with the philosophical and ethical underpinning of the systems of local government across the world. Chandler (2008) in 'Liberal justification for local government in Britain: the triumph of expediency over ethics', an important overview of local government theory, notes that the "justification for local government in Britain was based largely on expediential arguments rather than direct ethical theory concerning the right of communities to determine their own values". He notes that leading 19th century theorists like Mill and Bentham had valued local democracy not for itself but merely as a means of stabilising liberal democracy. He (Chandler, 2008, p.356) distinguishes an expediential justification – "local government as a means to secure efficient delivery of services on behalf of central government" – from an ethical justification "which values an institution or activity because it fulfils a morally desirable purpose in itself regardless of its value to other organisations". This distinction resonates in any discussion of local government in Ireland, and it can be argued that expediential justification has strongly informed Irish central government's view of local democracy. Given that at independence Irish central government by and large took over pre-existing structures – and followed pre-existing thinking on local government – this should not come as a surprise.

Chandler (2008, p.370) quotes J S Mill's concern about the capacity of local communities to make sound decisions on principles. He concludes (2008, p.372) "inasmuch as individuals should be free to follow their beliefs, provided these do not harm others, then communities with self-regarding interests should also be free to pursue their ideas", but notes that there is "an absence of effective argument that would rationally restrain central government interference in local matters".

This, in essence, is an argument for the principle of subsidiarity, of which more later.

Interestingly Chandler writes from the perspective of an academic whose discipline is management rather than local government *per se*.

Most academic writing on local government focuses on functions, funding, and efficiencies, or lack of them. Nevertheless, the need for a theoretical basis for local government has long been recognized. Rhodes (1999) *Control and power in central-local government relations*, although written two decades ago, is telling in its discussion of local government theory. He notes the subject "has been of peripheral interest to social scientists" and that "there have been virtually no academic studies" (Rhodes, 1999, p.1). "The justification for a theoretical framework does not lie […] in the inadequacies of previous work […] it lies in the ability of that framework to identify issues and problems previously ignored; to raise new questions; and to provide a distinctive reinterpretation of the subject" (Rhodes, 1999, p.2). The absence of a theoretical framework for governance at a local level in Ireland is at the heart of this thesis, as we shall see later. Rhodes (1999, p.16) notes that while "local authorities have received an increasing proportion of their total expenditure from central government, it is difficult to identify the consequences of this trend". The framework put forward by Rhodes (1999) in chapter 5 of his book, while valid in principle, has been superseded by changes in local government throughout Europe. In order to establish whether or not the lack of autonomy has a negative impact on the quality of cultural services at a local level, we need further research on this subject in the English-speaking academic world.

Beetham (1996) gets straight to the question at the heart of this thesis: "can a government only be accountable, responsive and representative at the local level if there is a popularly authorised tier of local government, rather than a system of local administration? (Beetham, 1996, p.34). He makes a very strong case that "elected local government has much greater intrinsic potential for realising democratic values than a centrally-organised system of local

administration" (Beetham, 1996, p.40). This is a useful article in any consideration of the merits of autonomy and local discretion.

More than two decades earlier Sharpe (1970) takes a different approach; the emphasis is on the values of local governance, but it is a contribution to forming a theory of local government. Acknowledging the expediential case for local government – it is "justified because it is an effective and convenient way to provide certain services" (Sharpe, 1970, p.154) – he seeks to establish the value of local autonomy under the headings of liberty, participation, and efficiency, building on other scholars' work. He discusses liberty, not in terms of the individual, but in the sense of communities being free to forge their own futures. His argument for the "undoubted value" of participation is strong – "it is only at the level of the municipality – the city state – that the individual can really participate in his own government, and so government is truly democratic" (Sharpe, 1970, p.159). He quotes Dahl (1969): the "city is the optimum unit of democracy in the 21st century" (Sharpe, 1970, p.160).

While one might think that local government as an efficient agent for providing services is the least contentious of Sharpe's values, accepted even by those who favour an expediential justification, local government is often attacked as inefficient or less efficient than it should be (Sharpe, 1970, pp.168-9), and it is this view which is behind the constant tinkering with local structures which we see in Ireland.

Clark (1984) addresses this matter directly. Despite its American focus, and the fact that it was written in the mid-1980s, it is a useful discussion of the meaning and nature of local autonomy. Clark (1984) is strong in defence of autonomy "a utopian conception of how the powers of social institutions ought to be geographically arranged" (Clark, 1984, p.196), and asserts "I deny the existence of a ready-made natural order; the choice is undeniably political" (Clark, 1984, p.197). He constructs a typology based on his contention that

autonomy is defined by two specific powers: initiation and immunity (Clark, 1984, pp.198-9). In this typology a local entity may range from having full powers of initiation (free to regulate and legislate in its own interests), and of immunity (having the necessary degree of immunity from central government in doing so), to lacking both real initiation and real immunity. His discussion of principle and practice in local autonomy, confined as it is to the US, and the State of Illinois in particular, is less useful.

Thirty years on, two Swedish scholars – Erlingsson and Ödalen – focus on this topic in their 2017 paper 'A Normative Theory of Local Government'. Noting Chandler's distinction between an expediential and an ethical understanding of local government, they develop strong arguments for the latter; they seek "to construct a normative argument for local government that values local government because it fulfils morally desirable purposes in itself" (Erlingsson and Ödalen, 2017, p.329). They see local self-determination as having the same ethical justification as self-determination for a cohesive cultural or ethnic minority. The distinction they make between local self-government and local administration is compelling. They develop their arguments in terms of self-determination, quoting Wolman and Goldsmith (1990, p.3) "by local autonomy we mean much more than the traditional concern for the ability of local governments to act unfettered by constraints from higher levels of government […] Instead we ask a much different and, to our minds, more fundamental question: do local governments in urban areas have autonomy in the sense that their presence and activities have independent impacts on anything important?" This is germane to the research question of this thesis. They stress that they are not arguing for an unlimited right to self-determination – "it is more reasonable to understand the right to self-determination as a *prima facie* right, subject to various qualifications".

Page and Goldsmith's *Central and local government relations* (1987) focuses on "what should be the powers and capabilities of local government in modern states?" (1987, p.1).

This is an interesting systematic comparison of relations between the central and local levels in seven unitary European states, and includes brief discussions about the philosophy underlying local government in some of the countries, e.g., France (Page and Goldsmith, 1987, pp.89-92). Page and Goldsmith do not, however, develop a theory of local government from their concluding comparative chapter.

Stoker (1991) includes a chapter on a number of theories of local government and the local state. He presents the theories in a descriptive rather than analytical manner, noting that "each of the theories […] can be seen to have contributed to our understanding of local politics". The localist view (Stoker, 1991, p.233) "explicitly argues the merits of local democracy, avoids complacency, recognizes the need for local authorities to change, and moves beyond a formal / legalistic perspective". The New Right model is based on the view that "the optimal mechanism for allocating goods and making decisions is the market" (Stoker, 1991, p.238). Stoker notes that the 'dual state thesis' has "stimulated an extensive academic debate". In essence it seeks to tease out the tensions between a central state mechanism which manages "social investment policies at a national level" while "social consumption policies […] are run primarily by local authorities" (Stoker, 1991, p.246). Another theory described by Stoker concerns 'local state and social relations'. Coming from a Marxist viewpoint, much more present in the academy in 1991 than now, this theory is based on the premise that "local state activities contribute to the interpretation of how society works and why. For example, is it a class society? Are markets efficient?" (Stoker, 1991, p.251). Although it is almost 30 years since it was published, Stoker's contribution remains a useful overview.

Hill (1974) *Democratic theory and local government*, like Sharpe (1970) mentioned above, attempts to set out a theory for local government founded in the reality of what the latter calls "advanced industrial democracies" in the late 20th century (Sharpe, 1970, p.153). Hill

is very clear in moving the debate about local democracy away from day-to-day matters of administration to how democracy is core to local government. Although many things have changed in the years since it was published, Hill's discussion of the relationship between local democracy and equality in a number of respects is still relevant: equality, in terms of participation by citizens, equality in terms of the need for positive discrimination in a society becoming more diverse, and also equality between local authorities, i.e. understanding how some authority areas do better in terms of funding and other resources.

1.3 Local government: role and functions

Having reviewed the theoretical foundations of local government, it is necessary to review what local government does, and how their functions are performed. John (2001, p.36) answers this quite baldly "sub-national governments are political institutions that run public functions that are given to them by law". A concise summary, but we must look elsewhere to find out more about the nature of such sub-national governments, and the range of public functions they run.

Callanan (2018) provides a comprehensive overview of local government in Ireland, and this will be discussed in Chapter 3. *The Oxford handbook of local and regional democracy in Europe*, edited by Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom (2011) is a good starting point to review the nature and extent of these "public functions" which are given "by law" to local government, across 29 European states. In its 785 pages, with one chapter on each country, and through the introductory and concluding chapters, we can compare the range and depth of functions assigned to local government in each state. The authors give a summary of the Loughlin and Peters (1997) typology, as a basis of understanding and comparing the various state traditions across Europe (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom, 2011, p.11).

The tables setting out the range of functions at local level in each country, although not strictly like for like, are very useful. In the Nordic countries the range of functions is quite extensive – Norwegian municipalities, for example, are responsible for maintenance of churches (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom, 2011, p.288) – and in all countries in that region it is the local level which has primary responsibility for social care, welfare, culture, primary and some second-level education, and many other functions (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom, 2011, p.227, p.246, p.267, p.288). While the degree of revenue which local authorities may raise themselves has an obvious bearing on the degree of autonomy they exercise, this is not always cut and dried. For example, while Dutch local authorities receive 80% of their funding from the centre, half of this is in the form of a general grant, which they can use for priorities they decide on, meaning that "Dutch local authorities still retain a relatively high level of autonomy" (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom, 2011, pp.103-104).

Role and functions might be described as the 'what' of local government. Equally valuable in Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom are the discussions on the 'how' — the culture of local government and central-local relationships in each country. In their introductory chapter they discuss a number of models of democratic practice in European states (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom, 2011, pp.14-20), including the differences between majoritarian versus consensus democracy, and direct versus indirect democracy. The tables included in the appendices are useful comparative tools.

In the chapter on Finland (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom, 2011, pp.241-260) Sjöblom focuses on what Finnish citizens expect from local government, both in terms of services and participation, as evidenced by turnout at local elections, over 60% in all local elections since the 1950s. The emphasis on consensus in Sweden and other states in the Nordic region is noted. Local government is an arena of political action, and not merely

administration – locally elected representatives make decisions which directly affect their voters – and this is discussed for most of the 29 states under the heading 'Institutional expression of subnational democracy'.

In summary this volume is of great help in understanding what local government does, and how it does it, across Europe.

John (2001) is also informative, but takes a different approach. The central thesis of the book is that while "the practices and institutions of local politics in Western Europe . . . largely reflected the consolidation of many national democracies at the end of the nineteenth century" (John, 2001, p.1) this is no longer the case. The author's view is that now "European states are experiencing the first signs of a more variegated, independent and experimental from of local politics" (John, 2001, p.2). In the next two chapters John discusses local government functions and the nature of local regimes across western Europe; this is a broad-brush comparative review rather than a country-by-country study. In the next part of the book John makes a compelling case for his argument that local governance is changing. The causes of this change are discussed: the impact of the European union (John, 2001, pp.61-92), the impact of privatization of services, enforced by national governments, and the so-called 'new public management' (John, 2001, pp.93-108). He goes on to discuss the role of leadership at a local level, for example the introduction of directly elected mayors in countries which did not have them (John, 2001, pp.146-153), and ends with a positive chapter on how local democracy can be renewed – not abstract theory but concrete examples of what is happening across Europe, such as citizens juries, community councils, and the use of communications technologies (John, 2001, pp.159-165). The discussion in this part of the book on how increased oversight from a higher level can weaken democracy and citizens' trust in local government is interesting for Irish readers.

Batley and Stoker (1991) covers similar ground to John, but from a decade earlier. Most of the 15 chapters discuss individual countries, and it is interesting to compare the discussions of local functions and governance over a period of 20 years - Batley and Stoker (1991), John (2001) and Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom (2011). In the most relevant chapter Blair, (in Batley and Stoker, 1991, p.42), notes that "the actual degree of local autonomy in different countries is not easy to compare, depending as it does on the interplay of a large number of factors which are often difficult to measure", and identifies the "range of responsibilities of local authorities" as an obvious starting point. His discussion of the notion of general competence is still highly relevant. General competence means the "right to intervene and take initiatives with respect to any matter relating to the local community" not specifically excluded by law. While conceding that "it is questionable whether the existence of the principle of general competence *per se* necessarily entails a higher degree of autonomy" he argues that the "importance of the general competence lies perhaps rather in the symbolic and psychological sphere" (Blair, in Batley and Stoker, 1991, pp.50-51).

1.4 Principle of subsidiarity

This section of the Literature Review discusses the concept of subsidiarity – what it means in general terms, but particularly its importance in local government, in Europe, and in other parts of the world. There is a considerable body of literature on the principle of subsidiarity in local government, very little of it, however, relating to the Irish experience of local government. This discussion includes the legal provisions which are needed to underpin the concept, as well as the relative financial autonomy and range of functions that together are evidence of real subsidiarity.

Subsidiarity has a range of meanings, depending on the context, but in all cases, it presupposes decision-making at the level closest to those who will be affected by such

decisions. The principle of subsidiarity as it applies to local government in Europe is founded on two pieces of international legislation: The European Charter of Local Self-government, promulgated by the Council of Europe (rather than the EU) in 1985, and Article 5(3) of the Treaty of the European Union (otherwise known as the Lisbon Treaty). The latter, which in many key respects is based on the former, seeks to "guarantee a degree of independence […] for a local authority in relation to central government. It therefore involves the sharing of powers between several levels of authority" (European Parliament, 2019). Callanan (2018) remarks that

> strictly speaking, until the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, the principle of subsidiarity in the EU treaties applied to the relationship between EU institutions and national governments;

and notes that the Lisbon Treaty adds "a more explicit reference to the principle in the context of relationships between EU, national, and also regional and local levels of governance", Callanan (2018, p.291).

Before we discuss what the principle of subsidiarity means in the context of local government, we need to consider the wider context.

1.4.1 Subsidiarity: the wider context

The Dutch scholar Kees van Kersbergen, alone and with others, has contributed much to our understanding of the concept of subsidiarity. His published work is concerned with what this concept means in contexts well beyond the field of local government.

Van Kersbergen and Monow (2009), for example, discuss in *Religion, class coalitions, and welfare states* the importance of subsidiarity in the evolution of welfare state provision in Europe. Christian democratic traditions, especially those of Roman Catholic origin, favour 'subsidiarity' in the care of children, elderly, and poorer people generally. These traditions

envisage a type of provision which would take place as close as possible to the family, as opposed to state-driven provision.

In a paper written a decade and a half earlier, van Kersbergen and Verbeek (1994) discuss subsidiarity in the context of the relationship between member states and the European Community institutions. Interestingly they state that it was "only in the 1990s that subsidiarity evolved into a principle for curbing the potential expansion of the powers of the European Commission", noting that the concept had been introduced by Christian democratic parties twenty years previously to "justify the enlargement of the competences" of that institution.

In an important paper 'Subsidiarity as a principle of governance in the European Community', van Kersbergen and Verbeek (2004) discuss what subsidiarity means in the European Union following the Maastricht Treaty. They state that "talk of norms, rules and principles is slightly irrelevant" and suggest that "political-institutional checks and balances are more relevant for a solution". They write

> our analysis of the development of subsidiarity demonstrates the limited analytical usefulness of the theoretical controversy between multi-level governance theory and state-centric theory

going on to write that we must understand the "principle of subsidiarity as a continuous struggle over powers" (van Kersbergen and Verbeek, 2004, pp.158-9).

While van Kersbergen and Verbeek (2007) is focused on the relationship between member states and EU institutions, their assertion that norms or concepts are subject to "battles over meaning" is equally applicable to centre – local government relations. The acceptance of a norm such as subsidiarity "may just be the start of a fierce battle to define its precise meaning" (van Kersbergen and Verbeek (2007, p.234).

While van Kersbergen's papers are not directly about subsidiarity in local government, they are discussed because of the important point they make: merely having concepts such as subsidiarity established in treaties and law is not enough. This has lessons for any consideration of subsidiarity at sub-national levels.

While the literature on the principle of subsidiarity in local government is considerable, it is not quite as rich as that on subsidiarity in EU–members state relationships. It is strikingly lacking in the literature on Irish local government.

1.4.2 Subsidiarity in local government

1.4.2.1 Local government in European states

Goldsmith (2002) 'Central control over local government – a Western European comparison' covers similar ground to Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016), discussed in detail later, but from a quite different perspective. Goldsmith describes how the nature of central government control has evolved, and how local government itself has changed across Europe. The first aspect of the control he refers to relates to constitutional controls: a country with an unwritten constitution like the United Kingdom where central government can easily change "the rules of the intergovernmental game" is in a very different situation to Germany or Switzerland, whose constitutions assign strong powers to sub-national government. He stresses how crucial central controls on revenue raising and spending can be for real autonomy (Goldsmith, 2002, pp.95-99). An important conclusion is that one can see a pattern of change across Europe – e.g., adoption of so-called New Public Management techniques; equally differences can be overstated (Goldsmith, 2002, p.109).

There are lessons here for the study of Irish local government. On one hand we are not alone in facing restrictions on autonomy at the local government level, while on the other hand, some countries have made genuine efforts to strengthen local autonomy with substantive legal and institutional underpinning.

One measure of subsidiarity is the extent to which local authorities feel able to be involved in influencing policies that directly affect them, either at national or EU level. Klausen and Goldsmith (1997, pp.239-241) identify four categories of local authorities in this respect.

Counteractive authorities see little importance in EU policies and opportunities and could be said to be sceptical about their worth – this hardly applies to any authorities in Ireland. *Passive* authorities, on the other hand, while not inimical to the EU, do little more than ensure compliance with regulations. Most authorities in Europe, not just in Ireland, could be said to fall into this category.

Reactive authorities are those which show a positive interest and response to EU initiatives and opportunities, while *proactive* authorities, as the name suggests, are the small number of authorities with the means to regularly bid for EU projects and locate agents in a Brussels office.

The Polish scholar Wroniszewska (2015) notes that in Germany there is strong legal and constitutional underpinning of subsidiarity. The Federal and Länder governmental levels are forbidden by law from getting involved in certain competences such as culture and education (Wroniszewska, p.264). This is a consequence of the attempts by Allied Forces in the aftermath of World War II to ensure that Germany would never again concentrate power at the central government level. Few countries were faced with this imperative, which explains why Germany, and to a certain extent Austria, stand out in this regard.

Kull and Tatar (2015), writing about Estonia, note that, while there is an adherence to the principle of subsidiarity in legislation and administrative norms in that country, it has little impact when the central government of this small state controls the purse strings.

Not all of the literature argues in favour of the principle of subsidiarity. There are arguments cautioning about the consequences of subsidiarity, and pointing to potential problems in the local government context. Rivolin (2005), for example, looks at subsidiarity from a quite different perspective, that of physical planning at a local level. Noting that "vertical subsidiarity pertains to the relations between levels of territorial governance" (Rivolin, pp.96-7; p.103), he asserts that subsidiarity and cohesion are opposed to each other, and argues that Europe needs more cohesion. Rivolin's emphasis on the expediential importance of local service delivery, rather than the importance of local democratic governance, has many echoes in Irish administrative practice, as evidenced in Callanan (2018), Roche (1982), and many others.

1.4.2.2 Beyond Europe

Schoburgh (2010) looks at attempts to reform local governance in the Caribbean. His paper discusses a collection of island states with weak governance and arrested economic and social development, where governments could be expected to have other priorities. He argues, however, that in recent decades "sub-national politics and administration are high on the policy agenda" (Schoburgh, 2010, p.27). A number of states, including Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, and St Lucia are pursuing local government reform as a means to improve social and economic development. Perhaps surprisingly, he discusses at length the principle of subsidiarity in the Lisbon and other EU treaties, and considers the relevance of these provisions for the Caribbean. He also notes that English-speaking Caribbean islands could benefit from the so-called Aberdeen Agenda of the Commonwealth of Nations which

states that subsidiarity is “among the principles of good practice for local democracy and good governance” (Schoburgh, 2010, p.29).

Further afield Grant, Ryan, and Kelly (2016) reviewed the Australian government’s attempts to reform every level of the Australian political system: government at the federal, state, and local levels. They note that the terms of reference enjoined the group who wrote the relevant White Paper to consider

> “(3) *subsidiarity* whereby responsibility lies with the lowest level of government possible, allowing flexible approaches to improving outcomes.”

They describe how the White Paper contrasts a minimalist with a maximalist approach, the latter meaning a substantive measure of autonomous governance at the level of city or municipality, with those elected to a council taking responsibility for everything which affects their community. They note that the White Paper favours an approach nearer the minimalist (Grant, Ryan, and Kelly, 2016, pp.708-710).

The authors quote Brown (2006) who stated “Australian federalism is probably more centralised in its politics, finances and operation than many unitary, non-federal systems of government”. Added to this Australia has seen “historical weakness in local government” (Grant, Ryan, and Kelly, 2016, p.711), not unlike Ireland, another English-speaking state which inherited most of its political institutions from Britain.

1.5 Local government in a comparative context: measuring autonomy

Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim, (2016) ‘Measuring local autonomy in 39 countries’ is a landmark paper, and very germane to the research question of this thesis. It puts forward a “comprehensive methodology for measuring local autonomy” (p.321). It follows on from their report for the European Commission in the previous year: *Local autonomy index for*

European countries (1990-2014) which sought to create a 'Self-rule Index for Local Authorities'. The authors' research covered all 28 EU members states pre-Brexit, along with the three EEA countries (Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein), Switzerland, and seven other European states.

They state "local autonomy is a highly valued feature of any system of local government. Nevertheless, local autonomy can also be controversial and can result in conflicts between central and local government when local authorities sometimes refuse to dance to the tunes of central government" (Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim, 2016, p.322). This should be no surprise; if the principle of subsidiarity is adhered to, and local authorities develop and implement policy measures based on the particular needs and potentials of their own areas, then policies at the local level will almost inevitably diverge from central priorities. The authors quote Clark (1984) whose four typologies of autonomy to measure "powers of initiative and immunity from higher levels of government" was discussed earlier in the section on local government theory. The authors also provide a useful discussion of the limits imposed by central government on the local level, making use of research by Goldsmith (1995).

The norm in measuring autonomy which the authors adhere to is that of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim, p.325), i.e., "the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population".

The main body of their paper reviews the levels of autonomy enjoyed by local government in 39 European countries according to 11 variables. Because these variables provide a very useful framework to measure autonomy, it is worth considering them at some length. 'Institutional depth' means "the extent to which local government is formally autonomous".

‘Policy scope’ includes the “range of functions (tasks) where local government is effectively involved in the delivery of services”. ‘Effective political discretion’ describes “the extent to which local government has real influence over these functions”.

‘Fiscal autonomy’ means “the extent to which local government can independently tax its population”. The related metric of ‘Financial transfer system’ is the “proportion of unconditional financial transfers to total financial transfers received by local government”, i.e., grants and other transfers which local government can use for purposes it is free to decide on itself. The other side of that coin is ‘Financial self-reliance’ or “the proportion of local government revenues derived from own/local sources (taxes, fees, charges)”. ‘Borrowing autonomy’ or “the extent to which local government can borrow” is also a crucial measure of real autonomy.

The other four metrics are ‘Organizational autonomy’, meaning “the extent to which local government is free to decide about its own organization and electoral system”; ‘Legal protection’, which means the “existence of constitutional or legal means to assert local autonomy”; ‘Administrative supervision’ or “unobtrusive administrative supervision of local government”; and lastly ‘central or regional access’ — “the extent to which local authorities are consulted to influence higher-level governments (all quotations in these last three paragraphs are from Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim, 2016, pp.325-328).

The results of their research are given in both narrative and graphic form, i.e., the graphs, tables and charts on p.339 to p.346. The 11 variables listed above are set out here at some length because the framework they provide is so helpful in understanding what autonomy actually means, and because that framework will be useful in reviewing the extent of autonomy in Irish local government, later in Chapter 4.

The fact that the five Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland) are all in the top seven states in terms of local autonomy, and that Switzerland emerges as

having the greatest degree of autonomy for the local level of government, would be no surprise to anyone. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security (2019) in their most recent survey ranked four of the Nordic countries along with Switzerland in the top five in terms of women's well-being across the world.

What is also interesting is that the degree of autonomy, measured by their 11 variables, has increased in countries such as Bulgaria, Slovenia, Albania, and Macedonia, which have either recently joined the EU or are candidate members.

It is disheartening for Irish readers to note that this country scores so poorly, coming in second last place, just ahead of Moldova. In fact, Ireland has dropped one place, from third last to second last, when Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim, (2016, p.344) compare the situation in 1990 with 2014. As stated above I will return to their work in Chapter 4.

Another important paper in looking at local government through a comparative lens is 'From guided democracy to multi-level governance' by Baldersheim and Ståhlberg (2002). It reviews trends in four Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, but not Iceland) during the last decade of the 20th century. Although it has a narrow geographical focus, it provides a useful benchmark for comparing the situation in the Nordic countries with that in Ireland, a country of comparable population.

Adhering to the principle of subsidiarity does not mean that local authorities can act like islands. In fact, subsidiarity implies that there are levels of governance above that of the local. Subsidiarity involves the central level acknowledging that the elected representatives and officials of local authorities are best placed to respond to the particular needs and potentials of their own area. Multi-level governance is a reality even in countries with relatively small populations; the question is how multi-level governance is to be provided for in law and administrative practice. Coordination and harmonisation are required for good governance, so how is this to be achieved? As Baldersheim and Ståhlberg ask, is this

to be "through draconian measures of central supervision and control? Or through the famous Nordic consensus culture producing standardised responses across the multitude of municipalities and regions?" (Baldersheim and Ståhlberg, 2002, p.75). One of the authors' conclusions (2002, pp.88-89) is that even in states where autonomy is comparatively strong, it can come under pressure because of fiscal pressures at times of economic slowdown. While autonomy may have come under pressure in the 1990s in the four states under study, this did not lead to an abandonment of autonomy. As the authors note "new means of central-local co-ordination may evolve as responses to challenges and crises" (Baldersheim and Ståhlberg, 2002, p.89).

Two further studies shine a valuable light on autonomy in local government by focusing on the situation in a large sample of EU states: Panara and Varney (2013) *Local government in Europe: the 'Fourth Level' in the EU multi-layered system of governance*, and Loughlin (2001) *Subnational democracy in the European Union*.

Panara and Varney (2013) select 13 EU states to "provide an account of the system of local government in each of the countries". In a straightforward descriptive manner, the local government sector in each is compared according to 10 topics, such as internal organisation, functions, local finance, control of local authorities, and reform (Panara and Varney, 2013, pp.xx-xxii). Ireland is not included in this overview but it is a representative selection covering all of the large EU states – Germany, France, Italy, UK – some smaller states such as Austria, and some recent members such as the Czech Republic and Hungary.

The study shows quite a range of autonomy from country to country. Austria has very strong constitutional protections for local government, although there are important differences in respect of their functions, which would be interesting to Irish practitioners. When Austrian municipalities perform tasks within their own sphere of competence (autonomous functions) they may not be given instructions by the Federation or the Länder.

When they perform delegated tasks, however, they are subject to instructions from federal or Länder authorities. One of the states which joined the EU in 2004 – the Czech Republic – has seen enhanced autonomy as evidenced by the fact that local government's share of public expenditure in that country grew from 6.9% to 9.3% between 1998 and 2004, although it has slipped back a little since. Hungary, by way of contrast, has seen "centralisation and the extraction of resources from the system of local authorities" (Szente, p.182, in Panara and Varney, 2013).

The most important chapter from a comparative point of view is Panara's own conclusion where he discusses specific conditions of political autonomy (Panara, 2013, pp.376-383), and democratic features of local self-government (Panara, 2013, pp.396-402). His discussion of local government as administration rather than self-government (Panara, 2013, p.371) is particularly relevant to Ireland.

What this study does not do is discuss the links, if any, between autonomy and the quality of services delivered by local government in the 13 states considered.

Loughlin (2001) *Subnational democracy in the European Union* does cover Ireland, as it was written when the EU had 15 member states, just before the major expansion in 2004. This study sees Ireland as one of two states in the "Anglo-Saxon tradition", although constitutional lawyers would quibble with his statement that there is no legal basis for the state in this country (Loughlin, 2001, p.5). The other traditions into which states are grouped are the Germanic (Germany, Netherlands, and Austria), the Napoleonic (France, but also the southern EU states), and the Scandinavian. This study is more relevant to the research question of this thesis as it seeks to "report on the state of democracy at the subnational level in all fifteen member states" (Loughlin, 2001, p.29). This is more than a descriptive overview as it examines the state of health of democratic participation in each member state.

Loughlin, in comparing Ireland with other EU states, notes that "local government in Ireland has been traditionally very weak with local authorities exercising few functions, with a limited financial base, and a low level of democratic legitimacy" (Loughlin, 2001, p.79). Ireland is not alone; the study notes that "our political systems derive from the institutions of the liberal-democratic nation-state that emerged in the nineteenth century" and suggests that EU states need "to reinvent their own institutions in ways that take into account […] new realities for the twenty-first century" (Loughlin, 2001, p.399).

Denmark, in its approach to 'user boards', has shown a way forward in participative autonomy at a local level which may have lessons for Ireland and other countries (Lidström, in Loughlin, 2001, p.360). As in Panara (2013), there is little discussion on the quality of services and governance at local level in Loughlin (2001).

Goldsmith (2002) examines central control over local government, noting that most discussions on this subject, such as the ones we have been discussing, centre on "how much autonomy or discretion local governments have from their central government (Goldsmith, 2002, p.91). His focus is somewhat different: it reviews the ways "in which central government control […] has changed across Western Europe" (Goldsmith, 2002, p.91). His discussion on constitutional arrangements repeats the common distinction between states like Germany and Switzerland, and to a lesser extent, Austria, where the principle of subsidiarity is embedded in the constitution, and unitary states. His discussion of forms of control other than constitutional is more interesting. In states where municipalities receive a large share of their funding from central government grants the centre inevitably has more leverage (Goldsmith, 2002, pp.93-4); in the Netherlands municipalities receive more than 80% of their income from the centre, whereas in Switzerland that share is just above 20%, although as we have seen Dutch municipalities have a fair degree of discretion on how they use that income. Even more relevant to the Irish experience is his discussion of indirect

tools of control e.g., intrusion of the market, and procurement rules, which limit local government's control over its own destiny.

His long discussion of the process of historical change sheds little light on the research question of this thesis, but the points he makes on the impact of the EU on local government are well made (Goldsmith, 2002, p.104). If "the EU constrains the ability of national governments to operate independently" then these constraints also affect local government. Having stated this, he notes that the involvement of German Länder and Belgian regions in EU decision-making on cohesion funds and regional policy increases the power of action of the regional level, if not the local. He notes "both the Flemish and Wallonian regions in Belgium have engaged in almost unlimited paradiplomacy" (Goldsmith, 2002, p.104). While this is also true for some large cities – Barcelona, Seville – they are a very small minority (Goldsmith, 2002, p.104-5).

1.6 Cultural Services in Local Government

Cultural services include, for the purposes of this thesis, libraries, archives, museums, the promotion of the arts, the management of arts institutions such as theatres, galleries, and cinemas, as well as other forms of recreational provision – public parks, swimming pools, and sports facilities.

The 'European Capital of Culture' is a local government-led cultural initiative. Cork city, discussed at some length in Chapter 3, had the designation in 2005, and for this reason the literature on this subject is also discussed.

The literature on the provision of cultural services in local government is not extensive; for example, neither 'culture' not 'cultural' appear in the index of Callanan's 446-page volume on local government in Ireland.

Lloyd (1985) is both an academic text and a manual for practitioners. His section on 'Recreational and cultural services' (Lloyd, 1985, pp.234-241) is a useful starting point as it sets out fairly comprehensively the cultural functions of local government in the UK and Ireland, including libraries and archives, arts promotion, galleries and museums, as well as recreation - pools, leisure centres and the countryside. Lloyd describes the complexities of day-to-day administration of such functions. While he does touch on cooperation and sometimes rivalries between local authorities (Lloyd, 1985, pp.239-240), he does not discuss questions of autonomy and local discretion.

Davies & Selwood (1998) is a snapshot of the condition of local authority cultural services in England, immediately after the election of the Blair government in 1997, when the newly elected administration "articulated what contribution it expects libraries, museums and arts in England and Wales to make to broader government objectives" (Davies & Selwood, 1998, p.69). The article teases out the tensions between local authority services

which "claim to be under-resourced (both revenue and capital)" and which are "labour intensive, their staff costs being 75 per cent or more of total expenditure" (Davies & Selwood, 1998, p.95) on the one side, and an ambitious central government on the other which wanted to recruit local government to help deliver its own ambitious agenda.

Bianchini and Parkinson (1993) look at culture from a very different angle to Davies & Selwood, and Lloyd: how cultural policy as a strategy has aided urban regeneration in a number of European countries. While Barcelona, perhaps surprisingly, is not included in their survey, case studies of cities like Bilbao, Bologna, and Rennes show how local autonomy in the cultural field has enabled cities to re-invent themselves. The discussion of Bilbao predates the installation of the Guggenheim Museum there, but illustrates how the forward-thinking of the city decision-makers, and their relative freedom of action, made it possible (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993, pp.73-89). Bologna's achievements in cultural policy go back much further, and spring from different roots:

> Bologna did not develop a vigorous cultural policy in response to urban decay, economic decline or competitive pressure […] the transformation of Bologna's cultural policy occurred under the impetus of a cultural crisis in the 1970s, the rift between socially marginalised and unrepresented young people and the political institutions of the city (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993, p.90).

That the city council in Bologna was able to pursue radical policies without the guidance of the national government, and sometimes in conflict with central policies, is testament to a degree of local autonomy, and a willingness by political actors to use it to achieve "significant successes in cultural policy terms" (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993, p.112).

Bianchini and Parkinson (1993) is a useful study of local autonomy and discretion in cultural policy as it covers cities in Northern Europe – Rotterdam, Hamburg and Rennes – as well as in the south — the two case studies mentioned above and Montpellier. The book also covers Glasgow and Liverpool. In these cities a "partnership between the public and private sectors" was focused on marketing, the authors noting that in the latter "the

foundations of a cultural policy-led regeneration strategy remained at best unstable" (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993, p.176).

Gray (2004), noting the demand in recent decades for joined-up government, looks at the area of the arts and cultural planning at sub-national level "with a particular emphasis upon how one of the component policy sectors in this area (the arts) has adapted to the new pressures and circumstances" (Gray, 2004, p.38). His focus is on local government "as local authorities have been considered by central government to be the key organisations for developing and coordinating cultural policy" (Gray, 2004, p.39).

Gray (2004) defines cultural planning as "involving the use of cultural resources for the integrated development of communities" and "a culturally sensitive approach to urban and regional planning" (Gray, 2004, p.43). He notes that neither culture nor the arts "has a particularly significant political profile" (Gray, 2004, p.41) – true for the UK and Ireland, but not for some of the countries discussed in Bianchini and Parkinson – Italy, Spain, France. He identifies "lack of clarity at all stages of the cultural strategy process" (Gray, 2004, p.39) as one reason why the process has not worked, due to the "inherently localised and bottom-up nature of both the arts and cultural planning" (Gray, 2004, p.48). This is an interesting take on autonomy, to see localism and "the bottom-up" nature of the sector as an inhibitor, quite a contrast to continental and Nordic experience.

In Nordic countries, or so it seems from the outside, cultural policy does have a significant political profile. Håkonsen and Løyland (2016) look at a very specific aspect of the administration of cultural services in Norway: how local government allocates its resources to eight sub categories of cultural services, including children and youth cultural services, libraries, cultural heritage, and five other sectors. They calculate "a system of demand relations that are interdependently linked to each other" (Håkonsen and Løyland, 2016, p.487). While the matter of central control over the setting of priorities and allocation of

resources is not addressed, one may assume that this may be because it is not a factor in a country where the centre trusts the local level to make decisions according to the needs of local citizens.

García (2007) assesses whether high profile cultural events achieve their stated regeneration aims; "despite the wide acceptance that the arts can be useful tools for city renewal" (García, 2007, p.103) she finds that this is not the case in her study of large-scale events in Glasgow, Sydney, and Barcelona. Sydney hosted the Olympics in 2000, and put in place a 4-year cultural programme from 1996. This was very much a side project to the Olympics itself. More recently Barcelona hosted the Universal Forum of Cultures in 2004, which seems to have been so diffuse in nature as to have lacked any clear focus (García, 2007, p.112).

In all three cases, although Sydney and especially Barcelona had a considerable degree of local discretion, the events did not meet their targets, and the author points to the need to have "arts programming […] as a factor within the broader cultural agenda and fully integrated with it" (García, 2007, p.116).

Glasgow's year as European Capital of Culture in 1990 is the earliest case study here. The author finds that the "economic bias behind the event biased the artistic programme", which she does not lay at the door of the programme itself but states is "evidence of a lack of forward planning and artistic policies" (García, 2007, p.108).

This brings us on to the European Capital of Culture and its significance in local cultural policy and programming. There are quite a few studies of individual city programmes, but a distinct absence of studies of a comparative nature, which would address the question of how local autonomy and discretion in setting the policy objectives of the cities' respective programmes impacted on their perceived success. These individual studies include Hudson

et al (2014) on Umeå in northeast Sweden, Meekes, Buda and de Roo (2017) on Leeuwarden, the capital of the Frisian region in the Netherlands, Sebová *et al* (2014) on Košice in Slovakia, and de Albeniz *et al* (2019) on Donostia-San Sebastian in the Basque country.

The most relevant and useful study, in terms of the topic of this thesis, is Jancovich and Hansen (2018). This recent study looks at Aarhus in Denmark, like Cork the second city of its country, and located a long distance from the capital. Noting that "major events such as the European Capital of Culture claim to operate in a scale that offers unprecedented opportunities for acting as a catalyst for city change" (Jancovich and Hansen, 2018, p.174) they focused on how well Aarhus performed in using culture to boost regional development in the broadest sense. Aarhus was free to create its own cultural and developmental priorities. While central government control of culture is not discussed *per se* the authors show that Aarhus was free to pursue its objectives in an area that was not a national policy priority.

What comes through clearly in these studies is the need for a city to have clarity on its own cultural policies, and the means, both political and fiscal, to achieve its own objectives.

1.7. Summary

Reading the literature on local government makes it clear that while there is a considerable body of monographs and journal articles on various aspects of local government, there is a distinct absence in the literature on whether or not local autonomy, or the lack of it, has a measurable impact on the delivery of services, particularly cultural services.

Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016) is an exception as it provides an invaluable discussion on what local autonomy means, and how to measure it. This paper does not disclose anything about how autonomy impacts on the quality of local governance, but it is still a very useful starting point to review in an objective way the relative level of autonomy in Irish local government.

To contribute to a greater understanding of what constitutes real autonomy at the local level, Chapter 3 reviews Irish local government in the light of what we have learnt about local government theory, functions, and the principle of subsidiarity.

Chapter 4 uses the metrics devised by Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016) to review such autonomy as exists in Irish local government, in particular in cultural services, in the process addressing the significant gap in the knowledge identified in this literature review. Chapter 4 makes special reference to the metrics relating to the essence of local self-rule, i.e., 'institutional depth', 'policy scope', and 'effective political discretion'.

Chapter 2 Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology followed in completing this thesis. The stages included selecting the topic, beginning the research process and reviewing the relevance of papers and monographs on local government, and compiling a contextual overview of local government in Ireland with a particular focus on local autonomy and cultural services. The final stage of the research was a series of structured interviews with practitioners, and this stage is described in detail.

2.1 Selecting the topic: local autonomy

The research question of this thesis was prompted by my experience of working in local government cultural services. Following a number of conversations with my supervisor, the question crystalised as 'whether or not local autonomy, or the lack of it, has an impact on the delivery of services, particularly cultural services'.

The next step was to review the literature on local government, to see if this question has already been addressed.

2.2. Conducting the Literature Review

To conduct this review I searched databases, beginning with the 'OneSearch' facility on the UCC Library homepage. This was the most important search tool, as it gave access to not only the monograph collections of the Boole Library, but also to the journals to which the University subscribes, and to JSTOR, a digital library of academic journals and books. I also used the 'EndNote' facility in the initial stages of researching my literature review. I used Google Scholar to a limited degree. This is because 'OneSearch' and 'EndNote' have, for the most part, provided access to the papers and monographs I was seeking. I used search words / phrases relevant to the topic such as 'principle of subsidiarity', 'local government theory', and 'autonomy', and used techniques like Boolean operators (AND /

OR). As the searches progressed, I further defined the search terms and phrases as required.

In addition, reading articles and monographs frequently led on to further texts, through the references and bibliographies in these articles and monographs. Callanan (2018) *Local government in the Republic of Ireland* provides a comprehensive overview of Irish local government, but also covers our membership of the European Union, and comparative local government. The extensive referencing and 29-page bibliography provided a thread for me to follow, which proved very useful. Callanan's (2018) discussion of local government theory and the principle of subsidiarity is comparatively scant, however, so in researching these aspects of local government I relied mainly on databases.

From reading the literature it was clear that the research question had not been addressed or answered.

Ridley (2008) *The Literature Review: A Step-by-step Guide for Students* was useful in planning and compiling this literature review, and I also found Johanson (2007) *Sitting in your reader's chair: attending to your academic sensemakers* helpful.

In writing the contextual chapter (Chapter 3) I made use of local authority and central government reports, as well as published material. My experience of working for almost four decades in local government was also useful.

2.3 Interviews with practitioners

One text in particular proved very important in reviewing objectively the extent of autonomy in Irish local government, i.e. Ladner, Keuffer and Baldersheim (2016), which sets out a framework for measuring autonomy. To compliment that objective overview, it was considered very important to review the experience of those working in the sector by

way of a structured interview process. The practitioners included in this process came from local government and cultural venues (see 2.3.2 below).

2.3.1 Ethical Approval

Ethical review by the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) of UCC is required where the methodology is not clinical or therapeutic in nature, and involves, *inter alia*, direct interaction with human participants for the purpose of data collection using research methods such as questionnaires and interviews. For this reason, an application was made to SREC in summer 2020 [Log 2020-122]. Approval for my proposal was received on 30 July 2020, which included detailed requirements in respect of the Information Sheet and Consent Form to be provided to participants.

The Information Sheet and Consent Form are included in Appendix 4, along with the questionnaire.

2.3.2 Selecting Interviewees

Having discussed the appropriate number and range of possible interviewees with my supervisor, I invited eight persons to participate in the interview process. In the event one of these persons was unable to do so for personal reasons. I therefore interviewed six current or former senior staff in local government — five from Ireland and one from Denmark — as well as one person who has worked in a number of cultural settings and has direct experience of dealing with a number of local authorities, giving a total of seven interviewees.

2.3.3 Interview questions

I asked all interviewees the ten questions included in the questionnaire in Appendix 4. These questions were formulated to align with the objective framework set out in the paper by Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016).

The questions sought to determine whether or not practitioners found that local government lacked the institutional depth, policy scope, effective political discretion, and organizational autonomy, to meet the needs of the local area.

The questions further focused on whether or not they had encountered occasions when supervision from a higher level had impacted negatively on their work, and on participants' experiences in respect of fiscal autonomy, and the consequences generally of existing levels of autonomy for local government efficiency and performance. Finally, the questions sought to elicit participants' experience of working with other European cities / partners, and the light such experience might throw on Irish local government performance.

I asked all participants to give examples relating to cultural policy and practice, where possible. The responses from the participant from Denmark, and the practitioner from the cultural sector, were different because they focused on their own experiences, but the essence of the questions was the same in all cases.

2.3.4 Conducting the Interviews

Of the seven interviews, four were conducted face to face, using a tape recorder, and two were online using Zoom software. In the final case the participant preferred to submit written responses, followed up by two phone calls.

All participants were advised that the information provided would be kept confidential and anonymous, and available only to me. Once each interview was completed, the recording

was immediately transferred to an encrypted laptop and wiped from the recording device. The interview was then transcribed by me, and all identifying information removed. Once this was done, the audio-recording was also deleted and only the anonymized transcript remains.

2.4 Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

As I was beginning the final phase of the thesis, Ireland and the rest of the world began to feel the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and this impacted on the completion of the thesis. The Boole Library was closed mid-March to mid-August, which meant I was not able to finalize monograph references until the Library re-opened. Covid-19 restrictions delayed the commencement of the interview process.

It impacted on the interview process in another way as it was not possible to meet all participants face to face, two being interviewed online, and another participant preferred not to have physical contact and instead submitted written responses.

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Note: While the research discusses local autonomy internationally, and especially in Europe, and draws on the example of one Danish local authority, it is a case study of Cork City Council and is not a comparative study.

Chapter 3: The Context of Local Government: Ireland and Cork

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the current situation of Irish local government, its functions, funding, and the political context in which it operates. The evolution of local government in Ireland is briefly traced, followed by a discussion of the recent reforms in functions and structures which have given us the local government arrangements we now have. Particular attention is given to the provision of cultural services by city and county councils. Local government in Cork city is discussed in the next section as one example of local governance and services in Ireland, including the provision of local authority cultural services in the city.

The Literature Review establishes a framework by which international best practice in terms of autonomy and subsidiarity may be understood. The final section uses that framework to review how local government in Ireland compares with that in other EU states.

3.1 Local Government from the Normans to the end of the 20th century

In Ireland municipal local government, i.e., self-government of cities and towns, is much older than county government. While Gaelic Ireland had its own ways of governing itself, it was the Normans who began to institute what could properly be called local governance structures, soon after their arrival on the island in the third quarter of the 12th century. Civic government was born with charters granted by English kings – Dublin's charter was granted by Richard II in 1172 for example, and Cork's charter by Richard's son John in 1185. The chief benefits of these charters for the leading (male) citizens were freedom

from the power of local barons and sheriffs in matters such as taxation, and in the exercise of their, admittedly restricted, powers to improve their cities. With fairly minimal changes this position continued into the 19th century.

The Reform Act of 1832 abolished the so-called rotten boroughs; i.e., the privilege held by local elites to send their placeman to Parliament for a seat with a tiny electorate, giving them power and patronage, which distorted any notions of fair representation. In 1838 the so-called 'Poor Law' was extended to Ireland, providing minimal relief for the poorest citizens. Poor Law Unions were run by partly elected Boards of Guardians, based on electoral divisions created at that time, which still exist. This system proved wholly inadequate when the Famine of 1845-1850 devasted the island.

Soon after the Reform Act, Westminster established a commission to review municipal government in Ireland. With the passing of the Municipal Corporations (Ireland) Act 1840, towns in Ireland depended on Westminster legislation rather than charters for whatever powers they had. As we shall see, one of the main powers they had was to adopt the Public Libraries Act of 1855, enabling them to establish public libraries, museums and galleries. Ireland had to wait until the last years of the 19th century, however, for major reform of local government structures.

According to Quinlivan (2017, p.1)

> It is impossible to discuss local government in twentieth century Ireland without first referencing the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898. This act introduced into Ireland a modern system of local government, with county government on a representative basis.

County councils replaced what were known as Grand Juries, which were local bodies of worthies, appointed not elected, with power to raise taxes for basic infrastructure, such as roads and bridges.

At least as important as the legislative innovation was the political impact it had:

> The first election results were dramatic. Prior to 1899, unionists held 704 Grand Jury seats, compared to forty-seven for nationalists. After the elections, the balance of power shifted completely with nationalists taking 774 of the new council seats. Unionists won 265 seats, the majority of which were in Ulster.
>
> Quinlivan (2017, p.1)

Not that nationalist politicians were too enthusiastic about the reform; they saw it as an English solution to an Irish problem. County government had been pioneered in England and Wales ten years before, and a similar reform was then put in place for Scotland. John Dillon, the leading nationalist MP in the west of Ireland, said in the House of Commons:

> The Irish Nationalist Members . . . adhere to the view . . . that the wiser and the more promising way to deal with this Irish problem would be to set up, first of all, that central executive authority which must count for a great deal in the working of any local institutions in any country. (quoted in Marnane, 1986, p.49).

As well as setting up county councils, the Act also established a government level below the county: rural district councils and urban district councils. This was the most elaborate local government structure the country has ever known. Interestingly women with property could vote and stand for the lower level of government, but not for county councils or county boroughs such as Cork city, until amending legislation in 1911.

The newly established Free State proved that it was just as inimical to local autonomy as Dublin Castle, abolishing Poor Law Guardians, and Rural District Councils (which had been set up in 1898) in its first few years of existence. Despite Michael Collins' wish to replace "an alien and cumbersome administration" with one that was "fresh, Gaelic" (Roche, 1982, p.51) his Cumann na nGaedhal colleagues did not hesitate to make use of powers of dissolution contained in a British Act from 1838, dissolving the Corporations of the two biggest cities, Dublin and Cork (see Quinlivan 2017 and 2021), and more than 30 other authorities in the years after 1923. The most important and most consequential innovation of the early decades of the independent state was the introduction of city and county management, based on the US model; the first manager was appointed to Cork city

in 1929. The establishment of the Local Appointments Commission in the mid 1920s, ostensibly to counteract local corruption, was another innovation.

It was when the country began to emerge from decades of autarchy and austerity that central government looked to the local level to lead the way on proper planning and economic development. In July 1959 the then Minister for Local Government, Neil Blaney, TD, wrote to all local authorities as follows:

> it is the Government's stated policy that the State should, in future, participate to an even greater extent than heretofore in developmental activities, including activities which, while not directly commercial, will contribute to the overall expansion of the economy, help in the achievement of increased production, and create new employment opportunities.

In inviting proposals from local authorities, the Minister stressed

> The proposals need <u>not</u> be confined to matters relating to the functions of the Minister for Local Government nor to projects which the local authority are at present empowered to undertake (quoted in Marnane, 1986, pp.402-3).

This was the beginning of a new era in Irish local government, and the real start of strategic planning and economic development. It is indicative of central government thinking, then as now, that the letter refers to "the functions of the Minister for Local Government" and not the functions of local authorities themselves.

In the last decade of the 20th century, the government published a policy document called *Better Local Government*, a far-reaching statement of how local government needed to be reshaped to meet the challenges of the 21st century, and the implications and effects of this major reform will now be discussed in detail.

3.2 Local Government Now

After *Better Local Government* and *Putting People First*

3.2.1 Legal basis and elections

The 20th Amendment to the Constitution, approved by the people in 1999, inserted the following text to make Article 28A:

> The State recognises the role of local government in providing a forum for the democratic representation of local communities, in exercising and performing at local level powers and functions conferred by law and in promoting by its initiatives the interests of such communities.

Notwithstanding that this first section of Article 28A mentions 'local' three times, the second section of Article 28A makes it clear that local government will be subject to legislation enacted centrally:

> There shall be such directly elected local authorities as may be determined by law and their powers and functions shall, subject to the provisions of this Constitution, be so determined and shall be exercised and performed in accordance with law.

The other three sections of Article 28A deal with the frequency of elections, with who can vote in local elections, and how casual vacancies on councils should be filled. Elections to local authorities are now held every five years in late May, coinciding with elections to the European Parliament. The most recent set of elections were held on 24 May 2019.

A book, popularly known as 'Street' (1955) by local government personnel, used to be an ever-present in the offices of senior managers (and those aspiring to be) in every local authority. This was a huge volume, reflecting the amount of relevant legislation senior managers were expected to be familiar with. Since the passing of the 20th Referendum and a series of legislative and structural reforms in the past two decades, there has been a very significant consolidation of local government legislation, to the extent that 'Street' is rarely if ever needed in day-to-day local government management.

The two main pieces of legislation are the Local Government Act of 2001 and the Local Government Reform Act of 2014. The latter Act led to the greatest abolition of local authorities in the history of Irish local governance. It is in large part based on a policy document spearheaded by the then Minister for the Environment, Phil Hogan, TD, soon after the 2011 general election; this is called *Putting People First: Action Programme for Effective Local Government*. Before the 2014 Act there were 114 local authorities in the State, now there are 31. Before the Act there were 1,627 democratically elected local councillors; the Act reduced that number to 949.

Waterford claims to be Ireland's oldest city, but its long history as a separate entity was ended by the Act and it is now a municipal district within Waterford City & County Council. Limerick city is almost as old, but it suffered a similar fate and is now part of Limerick City & County Council. The Councils of Tipperary North Riding and South Riding, in existence in one form or another since the first half of the nineteenth century, were merged to form a unified Tipperary County Council. In addition, 80 town councils were abolished by the 2014 Act.

It should be acknowledged that the primary focus of *Putting People First* was not on reducing the number of local authority units, but on what it called 'A Wider Role for Local Government'. The policy envisaged "an enhanced and clearer role in economic development and enterprise support", "close involvement in community and local development", and "widening the reach of local government by using its capacity to undertake functions with or on behalf of other sectors". It might also be noted that the primary impetus to merge Limerick City and County Councils predated the document, and came from business and other interests in the region.

The Act made fundamental changes to structures and operations. 95 municipal districts (the number was increased before the 2019 local elections) were established covering the

entire area of each county (this part of the Act does not apply to the city councils of Cork and Galway or to the four authorities in the Dublin region). Municipal districts do not really replace town councils which were separate from county councils; they are not local authorities *per se* but sub-divisions of local authorities. It could be argued that it is fairer that every citizen in a county now has two levels of governance – municipal district and county council – whereas previously only a minority had two – town council and county council.

A local community development committee (LCDC) was established in each local authority, made up of elected councillors, representatives of state agencies such as An Garda Síochána, the Educational and Training Board (e.g., Cork ETB) and the Health Services Executive (HSE), the business sector, trade unions, and representatives of the community and voluntary, social inclusion, and environmental pillars drawn from the Popular Participation Network. There is a Popular Participation Network – usually referred to as the PPN – in each of the 31 authorities, regardless of size or population, another innovation of the 2014 Act. The LCDC is charged with compiling and implementing a local economic plan (LECP) "that seeks to embrace the objectives and work of local business, community and public service providers" in the relevant city or county.

There were changes to governance and management, including the replacement of city and county managers by a new office of 'chief executive' of which more below. In addition, the oversight and review of local government performance by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, and various central bodies is now much more onerous.

There were changes in regional spatial and economic strategy, including the establishment of 'regional assemblies' and the dissolution of their predecessors, known as regional authorities. The Act does not identify what the regional assemblies should be, this was left

to secondary legislation which established a) the Southern, b) the Eastern and Midland, and c) the Northern and Western Regional Assemblies.

The other important piece of legislation, the 2001 Act, was concerned with giving effect to *Better Local Government*, a government strategy which evolved under the Rainbow Coalition in the mid-1990s. It was published when Brendan Howlin, TD was Minister, but was implemented by his Fianna Fáil successor Noel Dempsey, TD, who also steered the 20th Amendment to the Constitution through the Oireachtas and the referendum process. The Act is in effect a consolidation of the law relating to local government powers and functions, following on from that constitutional amendment. The main provisions of the 2001 Act deal with:

- Local government areas and authorities;
- How local authorities are run: membership and elections; the role of Cathaoirleach, Lord Mayor, or Mayor; and the conduct of meetings and proceedings generally;
- the main functions of local authorities, the policy roles of elected councillors and managers, and financial provisions and audit;
- the ethical framework for the local government service – an important innovation – and various other provisions to do with bye-laws, changing street and townland names, setting up new town councils, and public local inquiries.

There are, as we have seen, currently 31 local authorities, following the reductions in the 2014 Act. Dublin is divided into four authorities: Dublin City, Fingal, South Dublin, and Dun Laoghaire–Rathdown. Cork and Galway each have a City Council and a County Council (although the two Galway councils are to be merged at some future date). The authorities in Limerick and Waterford are known as 'City & County Councils'. The remaining 21 counties in the Republic have a 'County Council'. These 21 counties, along with Limerick and Waterford, and Cork and Galway Counties, are divided into municipal districts.

3.2.2 Role and Functions of local government, after the 2014 Act

The 31 local authorities have

Physical and economic responsibilities: for local economic and physical development; local planning for housing, new businesses, etc.; and local road maintenance and improvement.

Social and cultural responsibilities: for the provision of social housing and related community provision; local cultural provision, including libraries, archives, museums, arts promotion, and heritage; and local amenities: provision of public parks and sporting facilities.

Environmental and public safety responsibilities: for fire services and civil defence; dealing with derelict sites and ensuring clean air, water, and environment generally, although primary responsibility for the supply of clean water and the disposal of foul water now rests with Irish Water.

Smaller rural authorities have different priorities to larger urban ones, and there are differences in priorities and emphases even between authorities of a similar size. Each local authority exercises a range of support functions, to enable its front-line departments to operate more effectively; these include finance, human resources, information and communications technologies, legal affairs, corporate or council-wide affairs which include supporting the elected members. Most larger authorities have an architects' department.

The functions of local authorities are grouped in eight programme groups, but this is mainly for fiscal comparative reasons, and does not align with how local authorities organize their work (see Structures, 3.2.4).

The programme groups are:

A. Housing & Building;
B. Road Transport & Safety;
C. Water Services;
D. Development Management;
E. Environmental Services;
F. Recreation & Amenity;
G. Agriculture, Education, Health & Welfare;
H. Miscellaneous Services.

3.2.3. Leadership

The first act of a local authority when it assembles after elections is to elect its leader. In Dublin and Cork this position is known as Lord Mayor. In the others it is known as Mayor or Cathaoirleach. This is a mainly honorary position, held for a 12-month period. It is rare nowadays for one party to have a majority on a council, so the position is usually shared between parties, or organized groups of independent councillors, on foot of a pact which usually lasts for the five-year term of a council, and which is arrived at in the weeks after the elections. The 2019 plebiscite on whether or not some cities should have a directly elected Lord Mayor is discussed at 3.4.2 below.

At the top table in council chambers the Lord Mayor, Mayor, or Cathaoirleach is joined by the Chief Executive of the Council (CE). This position was created by the Local Government Act 2014, although it is really an evolution of the position of City or County Manager. The 2014 Act did little more than change the title, as the balance of power between elected members and the CE was altered only slightly in favour of the former – chiefly in requiring the CE to make more frequent and more substantive reports to the elected members on what is being done in their name.

What the chief executives think about the change of title might be deduced from the fact that when they changed the name of their representative body it was from the 'City & County Managers Association' to the 'City & County Management Association'. It is fair to say, however, that being referred to as 'Cork City Manager', for example, has a different ring to it than being called 'Chief Executive of Cork City Council'.

The responsibilities of the CE are set out in Section 141 (4) of the 2014 Act:

> Every function of a local authority which is not a reserved function is, for the purposes of this Act, an executive function of such local authority.

This is, word for word, the same text as Section 149 (4) of the 2001 Act. Reserved functions include adopting the annual budget and adopting local authority plans: six-year

development plans, five-year corporate plans (adopted in the first months of a newly elected council for the lifetime of that council), and other local plans.

While legislation and popular perceptions give precedence to Lord Mayors, Mayors and Cathaoirligh, the CE plays a much more important role within local authorities, and is responsible for all executive functions. It is he or she, not elected members, who is empowered to sign contracts on behalf of the local authority, it is he or she who has power to hire, or in very rare occasions, fire staff. It is he or she who is charged in law with carrying out the decisions of the authority.

3.2.4. Structures

Now that the dust has settled on the reforms of the 2001 and 2014 Acts, it can be said the 2001 Act is of more significance, certainly to those working in local government. The greater significance of the 2001 legislation is acknowledged in the 2014 Act where the former is referred to throughout as the 'Principal Act'.

The *Better Local Government* policy document, and subsequently the 2001 Act, introduced the concept of directors of services, and strategic policy committees. At the same time, it abolished what was known as the 'dual structure', which had for more than a century kept professional stuff such as engineers, architects, and planners (who reported ultimately to a City or County Engineer) apart from the administrative and clerical staff (who reported to a County Secretary, or in the cities, an Assistant City Manager).

Since 2001 each local authority has organized its work through a number of directorates led by a director of services. As we have seen every authority has a mix of frontline directorates responsible for the delivery of core services listed in 3.2.2, and which deal directly with the public, and a smaller number of support departments: human resources, finance, legal affairs, and information and communications technologies (ICT). Since the

legal basis and functions of all 31 local authorities are the same, one would imagine that their internal structures would be broadly similar, or at least that all urban authorities would have a similar structure, and rural authorities likewise. This is not the case.

Dublin City Council, being the largest in terms of budget, and staffing numbers, and serving the largest population, is different to all other authorities. It does not have directors of service. Instead, it has a chief executive, six assistant chief executives, and a total of 33 executive managers. These last are paid at the same rate as directors of services in the other local authorities, but have less discretion than directors in carrying out their functions. Dublin City Council is structured in six operational groups, each reporting to an assistant chief executive:

Community, Culture, Economic and Emergencies;
Planning & Property;
Housing & Residential;
Environment & Transportation;
Human Resources & Corporate;

Finance | ICT.

The three authorities surrounding Dublin City – Fingal, South Dublin, and Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown – have very different structures to the city but are somewhat similar to each other, with minor differences. The first two have nine directorates, while Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown has 10. The allocation of functions at Directorate level for these authorities is set out in Appendix 1.

Cork County, responsible for the largest land mass in the state, has a unique structure and one not readily understandable to outsiders. It has three divisional managers, at assistant chief executive grade – for South Cork, North Cork, and West Cork, a remnant of the era when county Cork was divided into three county health districts while other counties had one. Below the divisional managers are 12 directors of service. Some functions are devolved to divisional level in terms of service delivery, e.g., housing, roads; some are

centralised, e.g., planning, ICT. The Library & Arts Service is devolved, yet reports to one director of service, and also to the divisional manager for South Cork.

The most radical attempt at structuring how an authority does its work must be Limerick City and County Council. A chief executive was appointed just before Limerick city and county were merged by the 2014 Act. This experienced official put in place a revolutionary structure – by Irish standards at least – presumably based on lessons he had learned in the authorities where he had gained experience. As he saw it local authorities are responsible for economic development, social development, and physical development, and structures should reflect this fact.

He thus set up directorates for these three functions, supported by four other directorates: for Customer Services; Operations; Support Services; plus, a Regional Services directorate grouping a number of Mid-West regional functions for which Limerick City and County Council is responsible – water, road design, waste. The Economic, Social, and Physical Directorates were intended to be strategic in nature, while the other directorates would be concerned with day-to-day operations. Four years on, it was clear that staff trying to operate within these structures were struggling with what was expected of them. In July 2018 the directorate structure was changed. There are now four 'strategic' directorates, with Housing added to the previous three, and operational functions transferred to these directorates out of the Customer Services Directorate, which is now scrapped, e.g., Libraries and Arts was transferred to the renamed Community Development Directorate. There have been other structural changes, to try and make the Council respond better to the needs of its citizens.

The structure in the neighbouring county of Clare is easier to understand:

Economic Development;
Physical Development;

Social Development

Rural Development;

supported by a Director of Finance & Support Services, including HR.

Interestingly this structure was put in place soon after the appointment of a CE who had been a director of services in Limerick when the merger and structural reforms were evolving in that authority.

While the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (previously Housing, Planning, and Local Government) is the parent government department, local authorities also have regular and close dealings with the Community and Rural Development section of the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Climate Action, Communications Networks, and Transport, and the Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sports and the Gaeltacht, and less frequently with a range of other departments, as well, of course, as the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform.

3.2.5. Local government funding and spending

Irish local authorities receive their funding from a mix of central government funding sources and local taxes and charges.

The LPT or Local Property Tax was introduced in the aftermath of the economic crash of 2008, a new tax mechanism which would probably not have been politically possible at a different, less austere, time.

Business rates are levied on local commercial, retail, and industrial enterprises. The importance of rates varies quite a lot from local authority to local authority: it has often been remarked that one street in Dublin – Grafton Street – yields more in rates than all the businesses in County Longford.

There are various charges and fees, for planning applications, development contributions, parking fees, fines for traffic offences, dog licenses, various other fines and charges.

Local authorities can access some EU funding for projects approved by the European Commission but this is small in the overall context, and much of it only available to Objective 1 areas (northern and western counties).

Local authorities spent almost €5 billion in 2008 before the economic collapse, in aggregate revenue or current expenditure (i.e., spending on day-to-day running of local government programmes. By 2015 this had fallen to just €3.9 billion, but by 2018 had recovered to reach €4.696 billion (these figures Malone, 2019). They spent another €1.1 billion on capital projects.

Funding transferred from central sources must be spent on specific local authority services, such as housing or roads. The transfer from centre to local level is less than one third of the total spend – 31% (Malone, 2019, p.2). Local authorities must thus find more than two thirds themselves.

It is an oddity of Irish local government funding that the Local Property Tax (LPT) is reckoned as a State grant for accounting purposes. Although it is raised on houses located

in a county or city, it is collected by Revenue, and not directly by the relevant council. Healy's (2019) comment is relevant:

> the proceeds of LPT were intended for use in financing local public services. In practice the link between LPT and local public services is far from obvious although local authorities do have limited discretion to vary the rate of LPT (Healy, 2019, p.139).

The absolute priority for local government expenditure is housing, and this is likely to be the case for at least the next decade. Housing accounted for €1.46 billion in 2018, having fallen as low as €770 million in 2014 (Malone, 2019, p.4), one explanation for why we have a housing crisis. In an interesting illustration of the erosion of autonomy in this area of local government, Lewis (2020) charts the creeping centralisation of policy making, funding decisions, and regulation of social housing over decades.

Irish local government expenditure equates to 5.9% of total public expenditure, well below EU averages. In Denmark, regarded as the most decentralised of the EU's unitary states, local government accounts for 36.4% of total public spending. In Sweden it is 25.3%, and in Finland 23.9%.

Local government controls just 1.39% of Irish GDP, compared with 6% in France, 11% in Germany and 16% in Sweden. Of course, one must bear in mind that the real size of Irish GDP can be difficult to determine, given the role of multinational companies.

3.3. Cultural Services in Irish Local Government

Culture has a growing profile in local government, at least on the face of it. Of the 31 local authorities, just under half – 15 – have the word 'culture' or 'cultural' in the title of a directorate, and another lists Libraries and Arts in the title of a directorate. This was not the case until the last decade or so.

As one would expect this is truer of urban than of rural authorities. Four of the six large urban authorities have 'culture' or 'cultural' directorates. In the case of Cork city, however, there was a period of almost 10 years when the word 'culture' was missing from the nomenclature, until it was restored as part of the Council reorganization in 2019.

3.3.1 What are cultural services?

Callanan (2018) defines cultural services as

> the provision of public libraries, public parks and playgrounds, support for local arts projects, and in many counties and cities support to local theatres, museums, swimming pools, and a variety of other recreational and cultural facilities (Callanan, 2018, p.149).

There is a paucity of material on the subject in this country. Cooke (2013) is mainly concerned with structures for administering cultural services at national level, but the context it outlines is useful in understanding where local government fits in. The author laments the absence of "strategic policymaking [.] in the cultural field" (Cooke, 2013, p.1).

The Public Libraries (Ireland) Act of 1850 enabled municipal authorities to establish public libraries on the rates, and also enabled them to establish museums and arts galleries. This can be considered the foundational legislation for cultural provision in Ireland. It was the main Irish cultural legislation, and the only library legislation, for almost a century. While it enabled town and city councils, and later county councils, to establish public libraries and a small number of galleries, it would not be until quite recently that local authorities began to take cultural provision more seriously.

Every local authority provides a library service; each local authority has an arts officer and heritage officer (although since the economic crash some posts remain unfilled). Fewer than half of the 31 authorities maintain a local authority museum, and fewer again have a dedicated archives service or building. In practice library services are the main cultural arm of local authorities, especially away from the cities. This is the case not only for the development of reading and comprehension skills and support for lifelong learning, but in terms of cultural expression generally, and appreciation of heritage. Often it is the county library service which is responsible for the care of the archival materials and physical artefacts of their area, as well as historically-important printed materials.

The percentage spend on cultural services varies around the country. While all local authorities would claim that their culture defines who they are, as Barrington (1991) noted, the spend on culture ranges from just under 2% to 4% of annual budgets, with Cork and Dublin at the higher end. This is a very small figure, despite the impact which such expenditure has; it is telling that Callanan (2018), in his comprehensive work on Irish local government, devotes just two and a half pages out of 446 to the subject. The figure is low in absolute terms, but even more so in comparison with other European cities. In Aarhus in Denmark, for example, the council spent 628 million DKK (Danish kroner) on cultural provision in 2020, equivalent to €84.45 million. Much of the Aarhus spend is under headings not directly relevant to Ireland, and also includes capital works, reckoned separately in this country. It remains the fact, however, that Aarhus with a population only one third greater than that of Cork, spent more than nine times the latter's budget on culture [see Appendix 3 for details].

3.3.2 Centralisation and Standardisation

In the words of an historian "a French minister of education could boast that, as it was 10:20am, he knew exactly which passage of Cicero all students of a certain form throughout France would be studying" (quoted in Mulhern, 1959, p.383). The reforms of the Mitterrand era mean that this is much less the case than it used to be. In Ireland, on the other hand, the welcome attention given to cultural policy and investment in the past decade has gone hand in hand with a creeping centralisation and standardisation.

The then Department of the Environment & Local Government introduced Ireland's first national library policy in 1998, called *Branching Out*. With this policy came increased funding for new library buildings and for information & communications technologies. In the years since then the Department and the Local Government Management Agency have set in train much needed enhancements in the public library service, but at the cost of central involvement in the detail of local programmes, the opposite of what Barrington (1975) sought.

There are strong links between local authorities and the Arts Council, covering both strategic and operational issues. A considerable amount of programme and administrative funding and almost all project funding in the arts at local level comes from the Arts Council, and this gives the national body significant leverage in determining priorities at local council level. A local authority's scope for setting independent priorities is limited, when the Arts Council must, in effect, agree to these priorities in advance, or else funding will not be forthcoming.

A national initiative called ‘Creative Ireland’ was introduced in 2017, channelling some welcome funds towards local authorities. While initially it gave local authorities a fairly free hand, more recently there is a greater emphasis on alignment with priorities set by the Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sports and the Gaeltacht [formerly Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht].

The trend in cultural policy is clearly towards increasing national control and standardisation, further eroding autonomy at local level. Despite this concern, the increased focus, in both policy and funding terms, on cultural provision by local authorities is welcome. It is too early to say what benefits will accrue to cities and local communities from this increased focus, but it is appropriate to question whether these benefits might be greater if Irish local authorities had the degree of autonomy which their EU neighbours enjoy.

3.4. The Second City: Cork City Council

2019 was a year of transition for Cork City Council on two fronts: the city's boundaries expanded for the first time in over half a century, and its internal structures – the way it is set up to meet its challenges – were comprehensively revised. Before discussing the challenges facing the city, and how the Council seeks to meet these challenges, it would be helpful to discuss the extension of the boundary, as well as the proposal for a directly elected Lord Mayor.

3.4.1 The expansion of the city

The then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Alan Kelly, TD, established a statutory committee to review local government in the Cork region in January 2015. When the committee made its recommendations, three of its five members were of the view that the city and county should be amalgamated – a fate which now faces Galway city and county. The other two members argued strongly for a separate but extended city.

Because of fierce opposition by past and present Lord Mayors, and councillors and senior officials of the City Council, the recommendation was not implemented by the time the coalition government left office in the spring of 2016. Following a long and painful period – involving committees of inquiry, very public wrangles between Cork City Council and Cork County Council, and between Cork City Council and senior Department officials, Simon Coveney, TD, appointed Minister for Housing, Planning & Local Government following the 2016 general election, asked an Expert Advisory Group to advise him "regarding relevant options in relation to the future local government arrangements in Cork,

having regard particularly to the review carried out by the Cork Local Government Review Committee".

The recommendation of this committee was that the two councils be retained, but that a significant slice of the population and territory should be transferred from county to city. The main question for the group was "what governance and delivery arrangements would best drive sustainable economic growth and strengthen Cork's position as Ireland's second city" (Expert Advisory Group, 2017, p.4).

Their key recommendation was that

> Cork would be best served by a City Council that is focused on the development of the city and its immediate hinterland as Ireland's second city with the potential to drive the development of the city region (Expert Advisory Group, 2017, p.101).

The expert advisory group's recommendations were not accepted in full by government. Under the aegis of the Implementation Oversight Group which they established, what can only be described as horse trading took place, which had the effect of reducing both the population and territory to be transferred.

In any case the government finally approved an extension of the city's boundary in 2018. The Local Government Act 2019 gives legal effect to this extension. As a result, the City's population grew by 68% on 31 May 2019, from 125,622 to 210,000 approx. The City's area grew fivefold from 37.3 Km^2 to 187 Km^2.

Oddly enough, while the total number of staff at all levels of the City Council was increased, the number of councillors to be elected by the people of the new city in May 2019 remained at 31.

3.4.2 An elected first citizen?

The Local Government Act 2019 also gave legal effect to a government proposal to hold a plebiscite in a number of local authority areas on whether or not that area should have a directly elected mayor. The plebiscite took place on the same day as the local and European parliament elections on 24 May 2019.

Cork city was one of three areas asked to vote, along with Limerick and Waterford. Whether or not having a directly elected Lord Mayor would make a real difference to the citizens of Cork would depend on the range of powers that would be allocated by law to the office. From the point of view of the citizen and of democracy, this could have been one of the most important reforms of Irish local government since independence. The public were given little information on what was proposed and how it would differ from the ceremonial office which a councillor normally holds for one year, and in the event Cork and Waterford declined the offer, while Limerick accepted, in all cases by small margins.

3.4.3 New Structures for a New City

Cork City Council is a large urban authority with more than 1,500 staff, who work in 40 or so locations across the new city, including City Hall, a network of public libraries, maintenance depots, parks, cemeteries, and other centres. The city is identified in the National Planning Framework as the fastest growing city in the state. At the time of writing there is some €500 million worth of physical development under way or going through the planning process in the city.

The Council is responsible for planning the future development of this ambitious city, and ensuring that its citizens' needs for social, economic and cultural development are met. The Chief Executive advised elected councillors in the summer of 2019 that "in order to best deliver for our citizens and reinforce our ability to be a fluid and agile organisation" she had reorganized the structures of the authority "to ensure that Cork City Council is best placed to deliver for the City and its citizens and businesses" (CE's report to Council, internal document, 2019). The new structure is very different to the *status quo ante*, and quite unlike other councils in Ireland.

Three public-facing directorates report to an Assistant Chief Executive; these are:

Operations, including road maintenance, environment & recreation;
Housing;
Community, Culture, and Placemaking.

The vast majority of Council staff work in these public-facing directorates.

There are three strategic directorates:

Economic & Strategic Development;
City Architects;
Infrastructure Development.

These operational and strategic directorates are supported by

Corporate Affairs & International Relations;
Chief Financial Officer's department;
People & Organization Development;
ICT Services;
Legal Affairs.

The City Council's main functions are as set out above in 3.2.2 above. Because it is an urban authority there is a greater emphasis on social housing (close to 30% of total spending), transportation, and cultural provision and amenities, than is the case in rural authorities.

Project Ireland 2040 (2018b) is the government's long-term strategic plan designed to deal with the problems and opportunities facing the country in areas such as infrastructure, urban and rural development, transport, environment, and climate change. *Cork 2050: realising the full potential* is a joint response by Cork City Council and Cork County Council (2017) to that strategy, prepared before the final adoption of *Project Ireland 2040* (2018a and 2018b), intended to locate the city as an alternative development pole which would complement Dublin, and to garner the investment needed to make that goal a reality. The challenges identified by the document include managing and building economic growth; the delivery of compact growth patterns; and the delivery of much improved public transport infrastructure.

The ambitions listed in the 'Vision & Strategic Objectives' section of *Cork 2050*, for example to

"deliver an integrated, sustainable transport system . . .

"support the continued growth of research and development eco-systems . . .

"develop skilled human capital . . .".

are all admirable. As we shall see in the section on autonomy in Irish local government (**3.5**), the Councils cannot deliver these objectives on their own. The Councils can call on universities, central government, and the private sector to help make these objectives a reality, but no more than that.

3.4.4 City Council finances

The Council has a budget of €226,211,200 for 2021, up from €222,340,900 in 2020; the increase from €166,843,900 in 2019 is because of the extended city. 22.1% of the Council's income will come from state grants, compared to 19.5% in 2020 and 21.9% in 2019, with almost 4% from Irish Water. Thus 74% of the budget has to be raised by the Council itself, from rates (property tax on business premises), local property tax on residential property, social housing rents, and a range of charges and fees for services.

Payroll accounts for by far the largest share of expenditure - €80,723,000 or 35.69%. The related heading of Superannuation — provision for pensions for Council staff — accounts for another €19,683,600 or 8.7%. Thus 44.39% of total Council expenditure is on its employees, present and past.

A further 4.8% goes on loan charges, liability insurances, and a range of mandatory charges, leaving some €114,852,300, or barely over half, to be spent on the Council's operations – managing social housing, planning and development, providing library services, maintenance and minor improvements to roads, bicycle lanes, etc., and all other Council activities.

See Appendix 2 for the City Council's 2021 and 2020 expenditure and income, arranged by programme group.

3.4.5. Cultural Services in Cork City Council

Cork City Council's Local Economic and Community Plan (2016) opens with a wonderfully written piece by the poet and former librarian Thomas McCarthy

> There is a poetry in city life that's beautiful. Writers like Frank O'Connor or Mary Leland, or Conal Creedon and Kevin Barry, have captured the essence of Cork life in their books. They are our eternal witnesses, their works giving us glimpses of a deep urban soul. Reading them, and others, should centre our sense of recognition, as well as giving us huge hope for the human permanence and future of local urban life.

Cork City Council has well-developed cultural services, at least by Irish standards. The Council spends around 4% of the annual budget on libraries, archives, museum, arts promotion, and heritage.

The Council spends well above the national average on its library service. The *per capita* spend is close to that of Dublin City, the best resourced local authority library service in the country. The value of the service to the citizens is shown by the fact that Cork people use

libraries more than in any other local authority area: Cork tops the lists both for *per capita* library visits, and for items borrowed.

Cork Public Museum has the largest collection of artefacts of any local authority museum in Ireland, while Cork City & County Archives hold the largest collection of primary documents in the country, outside of the National Archives. It is housed in the only purpose-built archives building in Ireland.

The Council has budgeted €1,858,800 on its arts development programme for 2021, down slightly on 2020. Much of this – €1,308,600 – is in the form of grant-aid to arts institutions such as Triskel Arts Centre, Cork Opera House, and Everyman Theatre, and festivals such as the Choral Festival, Film Festival, and Folk Festival which are so important to the quality of cultural life of the city. Another sizeable amount goes directly as project funding to artists of all kinds, coordinated by a small team in City Hall.

Libraries, arts, museum and archives services form part of the Community, Culture, and Placemaking Directorate. The Economic and Strategic Development Directorate also plays a role in the fostering of the city's culture through the Heritage Office, and the work of the Conservation Officer, and of the City Archaeologist. The Operations Directorate (Environment & Recreation) is responsible for the maintenance of the city's parks and sports and leisure facilities.

The importance of the framework for measuring autonomy created by Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016) was identified in chapter 1 in the context of the literature on local government. This will be examined in more detail in chapter 4. It will be useful to refer to that framework at this stage to briefly consider how Cork compares to comparable cities elsewhere in the EU.

Aarhus, Porto, and Turku are broadly of similar size to Cork, each of them the second city of their state, and, like Cork, each of them a former European Capital of Culture. As we shall see in chapter 4, with regard to 'policy scope' as defined by Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016), Cork would appear to have the same range of cultural functions as e.g. Aarhus, Porto and Turku. But in terms of 'institutional depth' and 'fiscal autonomy' Cork is well behind these cities, as measured according to that framework, a finding endorsed by the specially commissioned interviews with local authority senior personnel. These matters will be the focus of the analysis and discussion in the next chapters.

As we saw earlier Cork and other Irish authorities have a far lower spend than these cities, in both absolute and % terms. Appendix 3 discusses the variance in functions and budgets in greater detail.

3.5 Subsidiarity and autonomy in Irish local government

The standard work on Irish local government is Callanan (2018) *Local government in the Republic of Ireland*. In its 446 pages, with a generous bibliography, it covers virtually all aspects of the local government system: what it does, how it works, and how it is financed. Chapter 10 covers the relationship between central government and the local level (Callanan, 2018, pp.243-252). Despite including the full text of the European Charter of Local Self-government as an appendix, Callanan does not address the question of whether or not the relative lack of autonomy in the Irish system has a negative impact on the quality of local services, and the quality of governance. Callanan has written widely on the experience of other comparable EU states. 'Domestic governance arrangements and Europeanization: the case of central-local relations in England, Ireland and Denmark' (Callanan, 2012) establishes that "local government systems are […] firmly entrenched in domestic settings" and that "Ireland's predominant administrative culture, where interaction is based on informal personal contact" contrasts with how EU matters are dealt with in a more structured way in Denmark, with local government formally and directly involved in decision-making. In his major work Callanan is content to use diplomatic phrases such as "administrative regulation and supervision of local government activities is a well-established tradition" (Callanan, 2018, p.250), or "local council decisions . . . are very much centrally regulated, supervised or revoked. Discretion is highly circumscribed" (Callanan, 2018, p.251). He takes the above quote from the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe report (2001). Chapter 10 of Callanan's book is a descriptive account of the central controls which are in place, with no comment on how effective they are, or whether or not they impede work which needs to be carried out.

Callanan (2018) does refer to the OECD report of 2008 which was critical of how government is managed in Ireland, stating "effective policies are those that when

implemented best meet the needs of the end consumer . . . and as such it is essential that those involved with the direct implementation of policy are involved in the deliberative process" (quoted in Callanan, 2018, p.258), noting that local authorities are not involved in the deliberative process in Ireland.

Callanan (2018) replaces Roche (1982) *Local government in Ireland* as the standard work on the subject. While a number of other books are essential for a thorough understanding of local government, for the most part they do not discuss in depth the impact of the lack of autonomy and local discretion. For example, Mary Daly edited a collection to mark the centenary of the 1898 Local Government Act *County and town: one hundred years of local government in Ireland*. Of the contributors, the late former county manager, Dick Haslam, discusses his experiences in dealing with central control, while, nominally at least, the master of all he surveyed as the person holding executive power in his county, and this is a valuable insider account. Daly's *The Buffer St*ate takes a detailed look (up to the mid 1970s) at the Department which under a variety of names, from Local Government & Health, through Environment to today's Housing, Local Government & Heritage, has been the main element of central control on local government. Her perspective is that of the centre – the book was commissioned by the Department – and she does not address the consequences of such strong central control.

The exception is the work of Tom Barrington, who has written widely on Irish local government and its deficiencies. Most of his output was published by the Institute of Public Administration and aimed at both an academic audience and practitioners. His *From big government to local government* (1975) is a collection of essays and papers delivered at conferences and seminars, originally written between 1963 and 1975. Barrington considers local government in the context of national governance, regional development, and community-led approaches. His was a lone voice when he identified "the need, in the

vertical sense, for the right use of the operating principle of subsidiarity that will provide for each level of the system an appropriate range of autonomy" (Barrington, 1975, p.218). His *The Irish administrative system* (1980) was a wide-ranging overview of the various levels and strands of the public service in Ireland, now mainly of historical relevance.

Boyle *et al* (2003) is also useful, as it "provides an overview of the progress on the implementation of the local government modernisation programme as set out in *Better local government*", the reform programme published late in the period of the so-called Rainbow Coalition, and discussed in 3.2.1 above. It does provide some insights into the BLG process which was in essence an attempt to increase discretion at a local level, while not losing central oversight.

What one learns from these sources is that when local government is discussed in Ireland it is mostly seen as 'expediential', rather than as 'ethical' to use Chandler's typology from Chapter 1.

Returning to the question of subsidiarity Callanan (2018) notes the importance of the Lisbon Treaty in introducing the principle of subsidiarity into EU law. Previously, before the ratification of that Treaty in 2009, the principle of subsidiarity related only to the relationship between the European Commission and other institutions, and the governments of members states. Article 5(3) of the Lisbon Treaty echoes the provisions of the Council of Europe's Charter of Local Self-government. The European Parliament in a factsheet (accessed 19.07.2019) puts it succinctly:

> the general aim of the principle of subsidiarity is to guarantee a degree of independence for a lower authority in relation to a higher body or for a local authority in relation to central government. It therefore involves the sharing of powers between several levels of authority.

Callanan (2018, pp.292-3) illustrates the apparent contradiction of the EU's position. The EU institutions promote the concept of 'subsidiarity' but impose regulations and new laws — especially in the area of the environment — with little or no input by the local authorities who are most affected by them, and who are expected to implement these legal instruments. In support of this view, he quotes Kaiser's (2005) assertion that "local and regional authorities implement some 70 per cent of EU legislation" (cited in Callanan, 2018, p.294).

Callanan (2018, p.306) notes "in Ireland's case, the early days of EU membership were marked by a reluctance on the part of central government to relinquish its gatekeeper role". He further states

> a situation is evolving of multilevel governance, with interdependent European, national and local actors playing a part in the development and implementation of policy (Callanan, 2018, p.309).

He quotes Rees and Farrows (1999, p.6) "the (Irish) government argued . . . that what was good for the state at a national level was also good for everyone in the state".

This is largely still the Irish government's position, two decades on, and touches on a central premise of this thesis: the principle of subsidiarity is not taken seriously in relations between central and local government. Callanan (2018, p.13) supports this view. Noting that according to the European Charter of Local Self Government

> services, where they can be provided efficiently and effectively, should be provided and decided on at the level closest to the citizen, that being the level of government the citizen is most able to influence.

and

> functions should only be delegated upwards where objectives can be better achieved at regional, national or indeed supranational level for reasons of scale, efficiency or effectiveness.

Callanan (2018, p.13) concludes:

> In Ireland's case, a different approach is taken to the 'burden of proof' – the presumption would seem to be that functions should be handled by central government departments and agencies wherever possible.

It is worth noting in passing that it is 12 chapters into this major work before Callanan addresses European perspectives, and principles and theories of local government. The first 11 chapters are concerned with more practical matters – the functions and fiscal basis of local government, rather than its philosophical or theoretical underpinnings.

Callanan (2018, pp.310-11, and table pp.314-5) sets Ireland in a global context, but one would look in vain here for a theoretical or philosophical basis for Irish local government. He is more concerned with practice than theory *per se*, but one could argue that the facts on the ground disclose Irish central government's approach to the theory of local government, or more properly local administration. Callanan locates Ireland in a group of 'Anglo' countries along with Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and contrasts the underlying philosophy and practice with 'Napoleonic' countries, such as France, Spain, Italy, and the 'Rhinelandic' – Germany and neighbouring countries. The type of theoretic and philosophical model which produces the strongest local government in the typology quoted by Callanan is the 'Nordic' – Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway – Callanan (2018, pp.314-5), as we have already seen in the discussion of Ladner, Keuffer and Baldersheim (2016) in the literature review.

3.6 Summary

Barrington (1980) put it well in his *The Irish administrative system*, his overview of government and administration: “local diversity is something that in our cultural life we prize, but are suspicious of in our political life, and have little time for in our administrative life”; and again “local government is, like any other historical ruin, something we are perhaps reluctant to see removed wholly, but which we are prepared to see moulder away”.

Using what we have learned in the literature review about subsidiarity and autonomy in Europe and the rest of the world, and in this Chapter about the lack of autonomy in Irish local government, it is time to review objectively the degree of autonomy as experienced by local authorities, and especially their cultural services, against the framework set out by Ladner, Keuffer and Baldersheim (2016), and review how this impacts on the quality of cultural provision in Ireland.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Context

The research question which this thesis poses and sets out to answer is: does the lack of autonomy in Irish local government have an impact on the range and quality of cultural provision enjoyed by Irish citizens?

Chapter 1, the literature review, establishes the theoretical basis for local government, and discusses the role and functions of the sector, especially in Europe, with special emphasis on cultural services. It argues for the importance of the principle of subsidiarity as the basis for effective and genuinely democratic local government. Of all the texts consulted, Ladner, Keuffer and Baldersheim (2016) stands out, as it sets out a framework for objectively measuring autonomy.

Chapter 3, which discusses Irish local government in general, and Cork City Council in particular, argues that Ireland is highly centralised, when one compares local government in this country with comparable EU states. There is a distinct absence of autonomy and local discretion in the range and depth of functions, and in the fiscal powers available to local government in Ireland.

What is lacking in the literature, in Ireland and elsewhere, is any detailed discussion of how autonomy – or more particularly the lack of it – impacts on the quality of governance in one geographic area (i.e., Cork city), and in one sector – the delivery of cultural services.

Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016, p.322) quote Wolman and Goldsmith (1990) in asserting that "different degrees of local autonomy have consequences for local government efficiency and performance […] as well as for local accountability, local democracy or even the well-being of citizens".

This begs a number of questions. Is it the case that the low degree of autonomy in Irish local government is preventing the carrying out of initiatives which are needed by local communities? Similarly, if local government is less effective and efficient that it would otherwise be, because of over-centralised controls, what are the consequences for citizens and communities? If it can be shown that Irish local government is performing less well than in countries of similar size in Europe, what lessons can we learn from them, and what reforms need to be made?

These then are the questions addressed in this chapter. It is proposed to do this in two ways: firstly, by objectively examining the level of autonomy of Irish local government cultural services, measured according to the framework of Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016); and secondly, through structured interviews with key local government managers, as well as with a practitioner in cultural services outside of local government, who works closely with the sector.

4.2 Measuring autonomy in Irish local government

Ladner's framework and cultural services

Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016, p.321) acknowledge in their landmark paper that "measuring and comparing local autonomy, however, has proven to be challenging". To meet this challenge their paper creates a framework to objectively measure and compare levels of autonomy.

This framework is used in this section as a baseline to measure levels of autonomy in Irish local government, in particular as it impacts on the planning and delivery of cultural services. The authors brought together a group of experts to assess local autonomy using the 11 variables in their coding scheme in order "to gather a large amount of comparable data" (Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim, 2016, p.328). "On a possible score between 0 to

37 the average value for all countries . . . amounts to 21.0. The lowest value measured is 9.2, the highest 29.2" (Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim, 2016, p.338). On their scale Ireland measured just 12.67 in 2014, down from 13.67 in 2010 and 2000.

The first three variables are closely linked and relate to the essence of local self-rule. These are 'institutional depth', meaning "the possession of capacities that allow local decision-makers to respond to the collective preferences of local citizens"; 'policy scope' including the "range of functions (tasks) where local government is effectively involved in the delivery of services"; and 'effective political discretion' or "the extent to which local government has real influence over these functions". The experts mark Ireland very low for these three variables: under 1 (out of a possible 4) for institutional depth, barely over 1 for policy scope, and just 2 for effective political discretion. The authors remark that "local government performs much the same range of tasks in all countries" (2016, p.330), but using their definition of 'policy scope' it is clear that Irish local government is an exception, not being responsible for "primary education, social assistance, primary health services . . . public transport . . . police and caring functions" (2016, p.326).

Cultural services are one area, however, where the policy scope of Irish local government is nearer the European norm. The table in Appendix 3 compares the range of functions performed by Cork City Council with those exercised by three comparable European cities, each of them the second city of a small or medium sized EU state.

The major difference between Cork's cultural policy scope and that of the other cities is that in those cities venues equivalent to Cork Opera House, Triskel Arts Centre, and the Everyman Palace are directly controlled by the city, whereas in Cork they are separate entities, while receiving significant funding from the city. Similarly, in those cities the council directly manages sports facilities and venues, unlike Cork. The other major

difference, and linked to the first, is the amount of the local authority's budget spent on cultural services, in absolute and in % terms, as discussed in Appendix 3.

The next four variables are important as well: 'fiscal autonomy', 'financial transfer system', and 'financial self-reliance' cover the ability of local government to raise its own revenues as required, and spend according to perceived needs; 'borrowing autonomy' is relevant when it comes to capital investment in cultural assets. Ireland is rated as under 1 for 'borrowing autonomy', and scored between 1 and 2 for the others. Its highest mark is for 'financial self-reliance'. There is a caveat required here, however; while Cork City Council, for example, raises three quarters of what it spends through fees, rents, and other charges, this is for a much narrower range of responsibilities than other European countries of similar size. Equally importantly Irish local authorities have a much lower *per capita* spend.

The other four metrics may be of lesser importance in the delivery of cultural services, but are still relevant: 'organizational autonomy' "the extent to which local government is free to decide about its own organization and electoral system"; 'legal protection', i.e., the "existence of constitutional or legal means to assert local autonomy"; 'administrative supervision' or "unobtrusive administrative supervision of local government"; and 'central or regional access', "the extent to which local authorities are consulted to influence higher-level governments". Ireland scores poorly here as well, ranging from just under 2 to just over 2. With regard to 'organizational autonomy' Irish local authorities have a fair degree of discretion in how they structure their directorates, as we have seen in Chapter 3. Almost half of all local authorities — and the majority of urban authorities — have 'Culture' in the title of a directorate, a deliberate choice on the part of the authority. Cork City Council has a Directorate of Community, Culture and Placemaking which gives cultural services a higher profile in the city than in the past. In Ireland, however, the local electoral system,

numbers of councillors, dates of elections, and constituency boundaries are all decided at central government level, which reduces Ireland's score in this metric.

Note: all definitions quoted in this section are from Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim, (2016, pp.330-337).

In summary – and considering that the highest value from Ladner's scheme is 37, with an average score of 21 for 39 European countries – Ireland's score of 12.67 is very disappointing, if not embarrassing. Only Moldova rates worse. It is a stark expression, using objective methodology, of the absence of autonomy and real self-rule in this country.

4.3 Measuring autonomy in Irish local government

The insights of practitioners in local authorities and cultural venues

As well as using the objective metrics described in 4.2 above to assess whether the lack of autonomy has an effect on the range and quality of cultural provision, it was believed that it would be important to review the experience of those working in the sector. For this reason, I interviewed seven current or former senior staff in local government and cultural venues. These included one former city manager, two directors of services, a chief librarian who also has responsibilities for arts, archives and heritage, an arts officer who has worked in a number of authorities, and a person with valuable experience in managing cultural venues and in the European Capital of Culture project, Cork 2005. In addition, to provide an international perspective, I interviewed the current head of libraries and cultural services in one of the major cities of Denmark.

4.3.1 Irish local government: fit for self-rule?

As we have seen, Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016) mark Ireland very low in terms of self-rule – between 1 and 2 out of a possible 4 for the headings 'policy scope', 'institutional depth', and 'effective political discretion'.

A former city manager was of the view that while the Local Government Acts of 1991 and 2001 give local authorities "a 'general competence' — the legal capacity to meet all the needs of the local community" — this is in the context of a narrow policy scope, given "the range of functions which have been assigned to other agencies". He believes that if local government "had a broader range of functions it could make a more meaningful contribution to the welfare of its citizens. However, the opposite is happening, more and more functions are being assigned to specific agencies".

The disconnect between the actual policy scope of local government and the expectations of the public was noted by another participant: "I think there is a misunderstanding by people who engage with local authorities. Ratepayers, citizens, I'm not sure they understand the remit of local government and the reason for that is there is so much there. Do we spend any time explaining what we do? People are constantly complaining *you didn't do this and you didn't do that*, but it might be an Irish Water issue, not the local authority".

This senior official had experience in other sectors of the public service and in private industry, and is clear that "we don't have discretion. There was a freer hand in the Local Enterprise Board (LEB) which reported to the Department of Enterprise. 50-60% of my budget I had discretion, which I could apply to training, mentoring, development. Anything that had a positive impact on job creation I could apply funding to it. As a vehicle it worked really well. Discretion was far better in the LEB".

The lack of discretion is clearly frustrating. “When you consider how managed the funding is, I don’t have discretion. I suppose I could reallocate within the Directorate budget but do I cut one section or another?”

Some of the people interviewed seem willing to accept the existing range of powers and institutional depth, and feel that what must be done is to use them to their full extent. For example, one senior official felt that there is a “substantial level of institutional depth. It could be better if we embraced all the mechanisms; the capacities are there”.

He also felt that “sometimes managers don’t want to use it; and these matters are confused at all times by the political reality of what Oireachtas members want”. National government is wary of the local, to put it mildly "at both civil service level and political level, neither want stronger local structures. The dual mandate was an awful loss, the link was broken and we are not over it yet” .

He wondered, however, if the Council “would be accepted as being the sole deliverer of all pieces of development” and “is it stronger for having the community levers under more than one roof”? Another stressed the need to make the most of the powers and discretion that authorities have

> the ability is there if we want to do it in some respects, bringing people together, involving people, people need to be given freedom. Anybody I work with I give them freedom to make mistakes, allow people take a punt, if it doesn’t work out, it doesn't matter too much, within limits.

The contrast with Denmark is telling, however. The interview with the Danish official endorses the view that Irish local government compares poorly.

> I don’t think I have ever experienced lack of ‘policy scope’. There is a general feeling both with citizens and local government that we have a very broad capacity of implementation. City government has quite a lot of powers, and most of the things that citizens need is regulated by local government.
>
> I don’t think that in my professional life I have experienced the lack of institutional depth. Danish local government does possess institutional depth. In this crisis [Covid] it is quite clear, the capacity is quite wide, even wider than the local government would want it to be sometimes.

The Danish official referred to international happiness surveys. While accepting that these can be vague and relatively unscientific, she noted

> one of the reasons that Denmark scores quite high is the amount of trust and the feeling that you can influence things. It is a short way from you to decision-makers. That makes sense in that local government has a lot of powers and they live just around the corner.

4.3.2 Is central oversight an obstacle to getting things done?

All participants were asked to comment on the assertion in Wolman and Goldsmith (1990) that "different degrees of local autonomy have consequences for local government efficiency and performance […] as well as for local accountability, local democracy or even the well-being of citizens". All broadly agreed. One commented

> where there is a high level of autonomy there tends to be a higher level of responsibility amongst decision makers, who know they will be held accountable for their actions. Local knowledge is brought to bear on matters and often results in more effective and efficient measures being taken. Too much central control tends to stifle local initiative and create a dependency culture.

Another noted that "It's all very bureaucratic, we can't do anything, a lot of what we get in central funding it's pretty much prescribed, *you can't do this and you can't do that*. And then there's the reporting on everything".

This view was endorsed by another, with specific reference to the cultural sector: "policies created by local government (are) always linked back to central government policy. This means that local solutions to local issues are always seen in this light". She pointed to a project led by the Abbey Theatre which partners with local organizations in Cork, Galway and other cities; this is an outlier, however, as it involves "partnering on an equal basis with local and national government, which is rarely envisaged in our centrist process".

A fourth official instanced the absence of the "level of trust that should and could be invested in the local level". The Housing Programme suffers from severe central controls;

in his view this is because of "lack of trust and retention of control by the centre; this is the biggest constraint". He asked "what part of us can't be trusted, quality design, quality build, quality procurement?" This echoed the comment of a former city manager

> local authorities make decisions in hundreds of planning cases annually in respect of private housing schemes. When it comes to public housing the local authorities' proposals require approval from the central department with regard to layout, design, etc.

Returning to oversight in the cultural sector, the interview process disclosed three instances where oversight is burdensome and an obstacle to getting things done. One senior official in cultural services said

> to get anything done we need to go through two levels of bureaucracy, locally with HR and/or Finance, and then the Department. This slows everything down. Workforce planning is a case in point. It is a huge effort to get approval at a local level, then you have to wait for a long time to get approval from the Department, even though it is up to the local authority to find the money for the staff, the government does not come up with any funding.

She said that the way that the My Open Library' (MOL) project — an initiative of central government —

> is rolled out is a case in point. The Department make it a condition of funding, that was heavy-handed and local authorities have no choice but to go with it. They say each authority has to have two MOL locations, regardless of local situations.

Not everything in the cultural sector is so heavy-handed; she mentioned how "the huge contrast between how funding from Creative Ireland works and the 4-stage development process for new library projects is very telling. Creative Ireland shows what can be done when there is a level of trust".

Another instance where central control is an obstacle is the RAPID (Revitalising Areas through Planning, Investment and Development) scheme. This was set up at the beginning of the new century "as a local community forum to address social deprivation – the key was having one official to liaise with stakeholders in an area. The government decided to pull it with no consultation. "When crime was a problem in North Centre City Dublin, they

reached for RAPID again! Cork was the only authority which retained RAPID staff members".

This is not only an Irish problem. The Danish official said

> what we often find is an excessive supervision regarding control measures on finances to prevent any case from happening, a lot of supervision before there has even been a problem. It doesn't help trust or goodwill.

4.3.3 'Follow the money': fiscal autonomy

Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim give considerable weighting to the measures concerning funding in evaluating self-rule "taking into account fiscal autonomy, transfers, financial self-reliance, and borrowing" (2016, p.348). All the participants, Irish and Danish, agree that local authorities cannot meet community needs without an adequate fiscal base. One remarked

> in local government the expectation is that we will continue to deliver services, despite not having the budget. I don't know if it's lack of imagination on why we don't prioritize funding for where it's most needed, I think it's kind of lazy. And funding is allocated based on national objectives, not local priorities.
>
> There is the political expectation that we can continue to do everything, but we don't have the funding.

A second official felt that the absence of fiscal autonomy over time meant that:

> the budgeting process is structurally poor. There are no real strategic messages asked of managers, no one is asking "what do we want Budget 2021 to say?" there is no strategic focus on e.g. sustainability, climate change, we just take 2020 figures and adjust slightly.

Another stated:

> while there are always budget concerns for every local government, this is particularly apparent in Ireland.
>
> In Cork City Council this has affected a range of cultural provision, mostly by not doing things, or having minimal budgets to achieve things. So, while in policy the Council wishes to maintain and develop the built heritage of the city, in practice it is almost impossible to do so, as no budgets are set for this purpose.

Even when money is forthcoming in the cultural sector it can be strictly bounded by excessive bureaucracy:

> They announce capital grants in August but the paperwork has to be in by November. The parameters are set very tightly, and we have no say in how they are set. If we knew earlier in the year, we would have a more considered proposal and a better result. It's a political thing, with the Minister wanting the kudos from the announcement.
>
> It's a question of control, they seem to want to keep control at every stage. The time involved in each stage of the library development process is exasperating, but I suppose that is what they want.

The constant worry about budgets has a deleterious impact on the cultural sector and undermines ambition:

> in this respect local government tends towards fiscal conservatism. Budgets for programmes and events are analysed with a view towards cost cutting rather than cost benefit.

Where, however, a local authority can "source external funding this gives greater autonomy - i.e. in match funding for Arts Council funding (there is) no oversight at all beyond usual reporting mechanisms".

A retired city manager stated that he never had any problem sourcing funding for capital initiatives and pointed to new libraries, archives, extension of museum, and the European Capital of Culture project. It is on the revenue side that there are problems: "proper maintenance of built assets is constantly an issue", as is care of statues and plaques.

Many participants returned to the question of trust, or lack of it:

> The key thing is trust, or the lack of it. There's a huge difference between the way we are treated by the Department of Culture and Creative Ireland, and our own Department. Creative Ireland allocate money to each county at the start of the year, and we have a free hand to do what we wish with it, to enable good projects to happen. We just have to upload reports at the end of projects.
>
> With our own Department they are second guessing us at every stage. We are the people who know what is needed at a local level, but are not trusted to make even small decisions.

Even in Denmark, however, the centre looms large; Aarhus built a new city library:

> with the permission of national government, we built more square metres than was needed at the time, so that we could, in time, enlarge the services, and/or have people to live in the building to create synergies. Then national government comes back and says 'you can't do it, you're not allowed to build to make money'.

Nevertheless, Aarhus has the political discretion and the fiscal autonomy to build a large cultural facility in the first place. "The decision (to build) was taken solely within the city.

They decide on ten-year construction money, a ten-year plan, this is solely local tax money".

4.3.4 What value on cultural services?

One senior official, in commenting on the value put on culture by Irish local authorities said "traditional local government was about hard infrastructure; in Ireland we are pretty late to that party, of valuing culture, learning, heritage". He wondered what "value we are giving to culture, learning, heritage, inclusion - we are still trying to find the science. At a local level where importance is given to culture it is 'personality-driven'".

Another official was very clear in supporting this view

> we consistently perform badly in terms of our spend on culture *per capita*, compared to our European neighbours. The value of culture is intrinsically understood by most other European countries, with little need for it to be continuously proven or spoken of as worth investment as it is here.

She pointed to the failure to establish a viable film industry in Cork, although it was supported by both City and County Councils: they were "unable to influence at regional and national level to include Cork in regional film support funding streams and in developing capital resource for it".

In her view central government involvement in the cultural sector has a pernicious effect

> either local authorities must bid against each other for funding, creating a false and ultimately unhelpful competition rather than collaboration, or authorities must respond to central government agenda-setting and take on their agendas.

The low value put on culture, by both central and local government, impacts on staffing in the sector. Workforce planning and regrading of library posts, for example, was four or five years behind that for the rest of local government. This impacts on the arts as well: "grading of posts is more likely to be lower than work expected, especially in specialist posts".

On the question of the planning and management of the European Capital of Culture, one participant was dubious about the local authority's involvement:

> you can't remove city council from Capital of Culture because they are the city and they own the designation, but their involvement is the cause of many problems. Colleagues in other European cities had the same experience; they were constantly looking over their shoulder – not only at the city authorities, but at sponsors, higher education.

This is an interesting point; Cork City Council had itself a low level of autonomy, but it was unwilling to grant a free hand to the body who ran the Capital of Culture project. Cork was not alone.

Rolf Norås, director of culture in Stavanger commune in Norway, interviewed 29 senior capital of culture officials around Europe, as part of the evaluation of Stavanger's year as European Capital of Culture in 2008. The results of these interviews (Norås, 2014) are as yet unpublished but show that tensions were commonplace between the city and the Capital of Culture agency, often because the former was unwilling to countenance real autonomy for the latter when it came to programme and especially finances.

Even where Capital of Culture programmes are seen as successful, it may not be for cultural reasons. One official said: "many cities justify their involvement because of economic benefits rather than culture". In Cork the final report on the year emphasised the increase in tourism as one of the main benefits.

4.3.5 How Ireland compares

All of the participants, both Irish and Danish, had direct experience of dealing with counterparts in other European cities, mainly on joint projects. One senior official felt that in comparison with continental cities the main problem for Ireland is "a lack of blue-sky thinking. We have pretty closed thought-processes". He instanced

> how long it took for people visiting European cities before it occurred to them that galleries and museums in Ireland should open on Sundays. In European cities if something is open on a Sunday it is giving a message that what is in there is valued. Because it wasn't done before, we don't do it.

Another wondered if the population base of Irish authorities was too small to be as ambitious as European counterparts. By way of contrast a third remarked "we perform well if you look at indicators of community cohesion and community connection – small population base means people know each other and there is a sense of connection".

One participant referred to Scotland as a model in this part of Europe: "Scotland is the best, there are much more joined up area responsibilities, that enable better communication between sectors".

One official who coordinates her authority's twinning efforts remarked "the system is so different in France where the *Maire* has so much power, in the local police, everything. He is the master of all he surveys, or comes across like that".

The Danish participant was of the view that

> it is quite clear that our autonomy is enormously high compared to some of the other countries we're working with. We take it for granted. Our willingness to experiment, to try out, is different . . . [even if] we don't know where they [projects] are going to go. We're not afraid that we're going to be kicked back if it is a failure. We don't hear that from other countries.

4.3.6 Ireland, Cork City Council, and autonomy

Considering these two measures together – Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim's (2016) "standardized code book" for measuring autonomy (p.322), and the more subjective evidence garnered from the series of interviews with senior staff – helps us answer the research question posed at the beginning: does the lack of autonomy in Irish local government have an impact on the range and quality of cultural provision enjoyed by Irish citizens?

Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016, p.328) state "between 1990 and 2014, there has been an increase of local autonomy on almost all variables measured". Ireland is an exception to this trend, dropping from fifth from last with a total score of 13.67 in 2000, to third from last in 2010 (also with a score of 13.67), to second from bottom in 2014 with a score of 12.67. To put our country in perspective, the best total score in 2014 was 29.76, and 27 of the 39 countries had a score in excess of 20. As noted above a retired city manager notes that, far from an increase in autonomy "the opposite is happening, more and more functions are being assigned to specific agencies".

Time and time again Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016) note Ireland's poor performance. In 'effective political discretion', they state that "the low-scoring countries are mostly the same as those with low scores for policy scope. In […] Ireland […] municipalities have very little influence when it comes to deciding on the services they are responsible for" (p.332). "In France, Ireland […} organizational autonomy is the lowest" (p.336). "The autonomy on practically all variables is very low for municipalities in the British Isles (UK and Ireland) similar to central and Eastern European countries with a low degree of local autonomy" (p.338). In their conclusion they highlight Ireland again: "there is still remarkable variation in the extent of autonomy local government enjoys. The Nordic countries […] constantly rank highest, whereas local autonomy is still very low in Ireland" (p.347).

In Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim's (2016) variables, 'policy scope' and 'institutional depth' cannot be separated from 'fiscal autonomy'. They make the valid point that "the more tasks local government is responsible for, the higher its autonomy" (p.324), as with a greater range of tasks local authorities will have greater budgets at their disposal. When one measures Ireland against the standard in the European Charter of Local Self-government, i.e. "the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law,

to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility", we cannot conclude otherwise than that we fail the test.

This framework clearly establishes that Irish local authorities have a very low degree of autonomy; can we say that this has a negative impact on the delivery of services, and especially cultural services? The interviews conducted as part of this research would bear out that assertion.

One interviewee, as we have seen, pointed to "the huge contrast between how funding from Creative Ireland works and the 4-stage development process for new library projects"; in the latter case local authorities have to submit reams of documentation to the relevant department in order to receive permission to build a new library for their own citizens. She added that "since we have such a centralized system only those services with state agencies to represent them have the best chance of getting central government support".

Another interviewee felt "that the less autonomy, the less local needs are considered". She added "in Ireland, a centrist policy has seen an unequal balance in population growth in Dublin. This means that our citizens have less access to culture than those in and around the capital. Local government can only spend in Cork, so there is little the Council can do to support touring and yet this is the only way to give exposure to Cork artists". Constraints on 'policy scope' and 'institutional depth' impact across the board. She pointed out that "Irish local government does not have responsibility for education and health. This means that cultural provision across these areas does not feed into, and be fed by provision outside these sectors". Contrast that with the Danish official, who stated that Danish "city government has quite a lot powers, and most of the things that citizens need is regulated by local government"; "there is a general feeling both with citizens and local government that we have a very broad capacity".

4.4 Prospects for reform

One of the participants interviewed was pessimistic: “local democracy is not working, do we need to change our understanding of what local democracy is? Hard decisions need to be taken and they are not”.

For Irish local government to develop in ways similar to other comparable EU states, and especially the Nordic countries, the first step must be a change in mindset. Central government will need to embrace the principle of subsidiarity in a way which has not been evident to date.

In the period leading up to the 2011 general election, when the country was experiencing the worst of the economic crash, the Labour Party produced a policy document aimed at genuine reform of local government structures and powers. Much of this was included in the programme of government agreed by the coalition administration in the spring of 2011. In fact, one can see how much was included because the Labour Party’s ambitions were left in their original font, different to the rest of the published document.

There was nothing unusual in an opposition party having ambitions for genuine local government reform while in opposition; nothing unusual either in the fact that the 2011 aspirations remained just that.

More recently the current Taoiseach, Micheál Martin TD, gave an address at the Centre for Local & Regional Governance, UCC, in February 2017 which *inter alia* lamented the loss of the sub county level of government, and promised to introduce legislation for town government for towns of more than 7,500 population and community councils for centres below that level. A private members Bill to this effect was introduced by Fianna Fáil but was not enacted into law before the last Dáil was dissolved. In that lecture he was candid about why real devolution to the local level is so resisted, not only by senior civil servants

but also elected representatives. Many of the latter begin their careers in local government but take a different view of things when they make it to Leinster House.

Looking further back, Tom Barrington, a significant commentator on Irish public administration, had been a long-standing advocate of stronger local government, and a critic of the heavy hand of the centre. He chaired a committee of enquiry which produced the so-called Barrington report, and authored a wide series of monographs and articles on the subject. The reasons why local government reform was needed in Ireland, according to Barrington, can be summarised as:

a) the need to develop the democratic system;
b) problems associated with centralised government;
c) the needs of regional, local, and community development;
d) the need to make best use of resources.

These reasons are still relevant, but despite Barrington's long-term advocacy we do not yet have a local government sector with the autonomy that it needs to deal with the key issues faced by the citizens it represents.

This is of more than abstract importance. There is growing recognition that one reason for the slow response by government to the housing crisis is the length of time it takes housing directorates in local authorities to get project approval from central government. It takes on average two years from the inception of a social housing scheme to the day on which the bulldozers appear on site.

A report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD, 2008] looked at the performance of the Irish public sector in a comparative context. The report was mainly concerned with the skills gaps of senior civil servants. It did identify the need for

> mind-sets and working methods, where all public employees are supported to ask questions, search for unexpected solutions, communicate with a range of audiences, and be drivers of change in their organisation (OECD, 2008, p.41).

A local government sector where central government officials second guess key decisions relating to individual cities and counties is hardly conducive to achieving what the OECD recommend.

This history of good intentions, followed by very little action, gives little reason for optimism that fundamental reform leading to enhanced autonomy is in the offing for local government and local democracy.

4.5 Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to review the impact on Irish local government cultural services of the existing level of autonomy, in the light of, firstly, the objective measures in Ladner, Keuffer and Baldersheim (2016), and, secondly, the insights and experiences of the senior practitioners interviewed.

A number of things become clear. There is no doubt that Irish local government is hampered by the narrow range of powers it has in its remit ('policy scope', 'institutional depth' and 'effective political discretion') and by its funding base ('fiscal autonomy'). This is borne out when Ireland is compared objectively with other countries using the framework developed by Ladner, Keuffer and Baldersheim (2016). It is also borne out by the responses in section 4.3 of practitioners, not least by the responses from the senior Danish official. The centralised controls in place are severely constraining when assessed objectively against international best practice, in particular the Nordic countries.

This is not the full story, however - "the ability is there if we want to do it" said one participant. Other practitioners interviewed touch on something less tangible, wondering if the Council "would be accepted as being the sole deliverer", and are of the view that it is as much about mindset and willingness to make use of existing structures. Nevertheless, what comes through in both sections 4.2 and 4.3 is that the low degree of autonomy in Irish local

government has a constraining effect on the range and quality of cultural provision enjoyed by Irish citizens.

In Chapter 5 I will describe what conclusions might be drawn from the two strands outlined above, as well as the learnings of the literature review, and sketch what might be done to address the gaps in our knowledge of Irish local government.

5 Conclusions

A number of conclusions emerge from the research in this thesis, in particular the literature review and the interviews with practitioners. These cast a light on the consequences of the low level of autonomy in Irish local government, and prepare the ground for further research.

The research has shown that autonomy is crucial for local democracy. For example, Beetham (1996, p.40) asserts that "elected local government has much greater intrinsic potential for realising democratic values than a centrally-organised system of local administration", and Sharpe (1970, p.159) says "it is only at the level of the municipality that the individual can really participate in his own government, and so government is truly democratic", both quoted on pp.9-10 of chapter 1. The importance of local self-determination is set out in detail in the work of Erlingsson and Ödalen (2017), on p.11, also in chapter 1. The review of the literature of local government, in particular pp.25-29, endorses the view of Wolman and Goldsmith (1990) that "different degrees of local autonomy have consequences for […] local accountability, local democracy or even the well-being of citizens". Given the importance of a democratic and effective local government sector, it is surprising, however, that there is no detailed discussion in the literature on local government of how the lack of autonomy impacts on the quality of governance, and in particular the delivery of cultural services, but I shall return to this shortly.

The research has also shown that the level of autonomy in Irish local government is low. This has been done in two ways. The objective framework put forward by Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016) demonstrates that Ireland ranks second lowest of 39 European countries surveyed, as shown in pp.22-25 and in pp.77-80.

In the view of practitioners, presented in pp.80-89 of chapter 4, local government in Ireland is less effective than it should be, and frequently does not meet the needs of local communities. The interviews also provide evidence that the lack of effective self-rule and fiscal autonomy in Irish local government is preventing the carrying out of initiatives which are needed by local communities, and that Irish local government is performing less well than in countries of similar size in Europe. The interviews do, however, suggest a quite nuanced picture, especially in pp.81-82: the current situation of Irish local government is due to a mix of legislative and structural constraints, and a constrained mindset which is itself a barrier; one practitioner, on p.82, feels "sometimes managers don't want to use" discretion.

One of the most important findings in the interviews, a key part of this research, is the lack of trust; trust between the centre and the local level, which in turn undermines trust between local government and citizens, as shown by the participant, in p.86, who said "the key thing is trust, or the lack of it", in commenting on the situation in the cultural sector. As one, clearly exasperated, official put it, quoted in p.83, "what part of us can't be trusted, quality design, quality build, quality procurement?"

The contrast with Denmark is telling, "one of the reasons that Denmark scores quite high is the amount of trust and the feeling that you can influence things" as described in p.82.

Another important finding is the relatively low value put on cultural services in local government, at least until recent times, compared with other European states. It is clear from the insights and experiences of practitioners, as set out in pp.80-89, that enhanced autonomy, and not least fiscal autonomy, would be required before Ireland can perform as well in this sector as comparable European states.

As one practitioner said “the value of culture is intrinsically understood by most other European countries, with little need for it to be continuously proven or spoken of as worth investment as it is here”, quoted in p.87.

The “standardized code book” for measuring autonomy devised by Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016) as applied to Ireland, and the more subjective evidence garnered from the series of interviews with senior staff, summarized together on pp.89-91, strongly suggest that the lack of autonomy in Irish local government does have a negative impact on the range and quality of cultural provision enjoyed by Irish citizens.

The research in this thesis has thus established the importance of autonomy for local democracy and effective local government, has demonstrated that the level of autonomy in Ireland is low by objective standards, and has also demonstrated in broad terms the consequent negative impacts. As far as can be established this is the first time such research has been carried out. While this research contributes to an understanding of the impact of low levels of autonomy, it is only a beginning.

I would suggest that there is good reason to carry out further and more detailed and targeted research on the potential benefits of enhanced autonomy in the sector. As noted in p.35 there is no detailed discussion in the literature of how the lack of autonomy impacts on the quality of cultural services enjoyed by citizens. This lacuna needs to be addressed.

One of the questions begged by the research in this thesis is how would Irish local government perform if it had a degree of autonomy comparable to that of the Nordic countries. In the rankings developed by Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim (2016), we have seen, in pp.24-25, that the five Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland) are all in the top seven states in terms of local autonomy. Achieving the levels of autonomy enjoyed by those countries would be an ambitious objective, but a realistic one.

The research in this thesis indicates that one way to move this matter forward would be to institute a pilot action research programme involving a small number of local authorities, urban and rural, in Ireland, and a number of comparable authorities in one or more of the Nordic countries, with the Irish authorities given enhanced discretion and fiscal autonomy in cultural services for the duration of the pilot. Such a programme should be in partnership with an academic research centre with competence in this area.

While this thesis has demonstrated that the low level of autonomy in Ireland has a negative impact on the range and quality of cultural provision enjoyed by Irish citizens, it would be of great benefit to the sector to measure the negative impact in an objective way through an action research programme as suggested above.

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Appendix 1: local authority structures, Dublin region

The three authorities encircling Dublin City – Fingal, South Dublin, and Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown – have very different structures to that City but are somewhat similar to each other, with minor differences. The table below groups the directorates for comparative purposes:

	Sectors	***Fingal***	***South Dublin***	***Dún Laoghaire Rathdown***
1	Environmental / Physical	Environment & Water Services Planning & Strategic Infrastructure Architects	Environment, Water & Climate Change Land Use, Planning & Transportation Architects	Forward Planning Infrastructure Infrastructure & Climate Change Architects
2	Cultural / Social	Housing, Community, Culture, Sports, Libraries	Housing, Social & Community	Housing Community & Cultural Development
3	Economic	Economic Development	Economic, Enterprise & Tourism (includes Libraries and Arts!)	Finance & Economic Development^
4	Support	Operations* Corporate, HR & Information Technology Finance Law	Corporate, Performance, & Change Management Finance Information Systems Law	Municipal Services* Planning & HR^ Corporate, Communications & Governance Law

Note to Appendix 1

*Operations in Fingal and Municipal Services in Dún Laoghaire Rathdown are responsible for local offices and depots.

^In Dún Laoghaire Rathdown, Finance & Economic Development has both economic and support roles; Planning & HR has both strategic and support roles.

Appendix 2: Cork City Council budget 2021 with comparison to 2020

The **income** breakdown for 2020 and 2021 is as follows:

	2020		2021	
	€	%	€	%
Housing, Local Government and Heritage grant	29,294,600	13.2	34,444,400	15.2
Irish Water	8,870,700	4.0	8,698,600	3.8
Road Fund Grants	11,763,800	5.3	8,658,900	3.8
Local Property Tax	13,965,600	6.3	15,490,700	6.9
Grants from other departments	1,761,400	0.7	1,767,500	0.8
Rates	95,460,300	42.9	95,954,900	42.4
Rent from social housing	34,948,500	15.8	37,991,000	16.8
Service income	26,276,000	11.8	23,205,200	10.3
Total	222,340,900	100	226,211,200	100

Comparison between 2020 and 2021 illustrates a number of important factors about the changing environment at a local level: the valuation of private domestic property is increasing, while business rates are static; service income is down due to, *inter alia*, anticipation of a reduction in parking charges and fines, a side-effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. The increase in grant aid from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage reflects the continuing priority given to social housing.

% rounded up or down as appropriate

In Cork City Council's budget for 2020 and 2021, **expenditure** was / is allocated as follows:

	2020		**2021**	
	€	%	€	%
Housing & Building	63,640,700	28.63	67,305,900	29.75
Road Transport & Safety	43,707,900	19.66	44,552,900	19.66
Water Services	10,220,100	4.59	10,121,100	4.47
Development Management	17,290,500	7.78	17,035,700	7.53
Environmental Services	36,901,500	16.59	36,836,000	16.28
Recreation & Amenity	26,579,300	11.96	26,289.300	11.60
Agriculture, Education, Health & Welfare	638,200	0.28	674,900	0.29
Miscellaneous Services	23,362,700	10.51	23,395.400	10.34
	222,340,900	100	226,211,200	100

As can be seen there is little change from 2020 to 2021, with the understandable exception of the allocation for Housing. Because of general inflation and budgeted payroll increases, there is, in effect, a small cut in non-pay expenditure from 2020 to 2021 for services other than Housing.

Note: the allocations are as per the programme groups set out by the central government and not as per each Directorate, which does not make it easy to grasp for elected representatives, the public / taxpayers, or indeed staff.

% rounded up or down as appropriate

Appendix 3: Cork and comparable European cities

Cork is the second city of the Republic of Ireland, with a population of 210,000 (estimated after the extension of the city in May 2019). The population of MetroCork is *ca* 300,000.
The total City Council budget for 2021 is €226,211,200; the budget for cultural services (libraries; archives; museum; arts promotion; heritage) is €9,316,250, or 4.1%.
The budget for parks and cemeteries is €8,288,100, at least part of which could be considered to be cultural provision, but such expenditure is not included in the cultural budgets of the other cities, so is not included here.

Figures from *Cork City Council Budget 2021*.

Aarhus is the second city of Denmark, located some 187 km north west of Copenhagen in Jutland on the Danish mainland. The population of the commune is 280,534; the metropolitan population is 349,983.
The total Aarhus commune budget for 2021 is 8.37 billion DKK (equal to €1.12 billion); the budget for cultural and related provision is 628 million DKK (€84,450,000), or 7.5% of the total.
Note: in Aarhus expenditures are included in 'culture' which would not be the case in other cities, e.g. 'citizens services' a concept not in use elsewhere. The commune employs more than 25,000 staff.

https://www.aarhus.dk/media/47642/forlig-om-budget-2021_docx.pdf, accessed 27 May 2021

Porto is the second city of Portugal, in the north of that country; the city population is 215,945, but the metropolitan area is home to 1,725,300 people.
A decentralisation programme is underway in Portugal, transferring wide powers on transport, education, healthcare and social assistance, and culture from the centre to municipalities. The Porto municipal budget in 2020 was €328,500,00; the budget for cultural services was €15,450,000 or 4.7% of the total.

www.porto.pt, accessed 27 May 2021

While not the second city of Finland in terms of population, **Turku** is regarded as the country's second city for cultural and historical reasons: it is the main bilingual Finnish – Swedish city, and a former national capital. The city population is 194,244, with 330,192 in the metropolitan area.
The total city budget, which includes city-owned enterprises (the city has more than 11,000 employees), in 2019 was €1,355,405,000 in 2019; the budget for culture was €78,613,490, equal to 6.9%, which includes the salaries and operational costs of the many cultural facilities directly under the management of the commune / city council.

Summary of the City of Turku Annual Report 2019; www.turku.fi/, accessed 28 May 2021

In all cases above the budget figures are for the latest fiscal year with data available in English. The size of the city budgets in the two Nordic cities, Aarhus and Turku, is evidence of very strong 'policy scope' and 'institutional depth', reinforcing their strong degrees of local autonomy.

Function	Aarhus	Porto	Turku	Cork
Health and social services	Services for disability, mental health, substance abuse, vulnerable children and adults; Nursing homes, assistive care; health promotion; pensions, housing benefits, etc.	Care of elderly; nurseries / pre-school; Housing; Healthcare Municipal police	Senior citizens; Children young people and families; Psychosocial supports; Health care	Partner in Healthy City initiative and liaison with HSE but no direct functions Housing
Education	Pre-school Primary & second-level schools Leisure-time activities for children	Primary education; Leisure	Overall education policy and school management; Pre-school and primary; Vocational education and training; Secondary schools	Core partner in Learning City; liaison with UCC, CIT and ETB, but no direct functions.
Economic	Services to job-seekers – benefits, rehab, retirees, immigrants	Local economic development	Economic development; Employment services; Real estate and housing;	Coordinates Local Economic & Community Plan (LECP) and Local Community Development Committee (LCDC).
Infrastructure | Transport	Urban development; Planning control; Waste management; Parks; Roads and other infrastructure	Local roads, public transport; Spatial planning & urban development Environment, water and waste treatment	Strategic urban development; City planning; Public transport; Sustainable city (waste management, environmental protection, etc.)	Roads, cycle lanes, street lighting, but not public transport
Culture	Libraries; Sport and Leisure; Arts; Concert Hall & Symphony Orchestra	Culture policy generally; Heritage; Sport	Cultural policy; Libraries and adult education; Arts; Sport & youth; Art Museum	Libraries, arts, museum, heritage

Appendix 4

UCC University College Cork, Ireland Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh	Autonomy in Irish local government: the impact on cultural services Interviews with Practitioners

Information Sheet

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. The purpose of this document is to explain to you what the research is about and what your participation will involve, so as to enable you to make an informed choice.

The purpose of the research project is to seek to determine if the current level of autonomy in Irish local government has a measurable impact on the range and quality of cultural provision at a local level. Your participation will involve a one-to-one interview with me. This interview will be audio-recorded, and is expected to take not more than 25-30 minutes to complete.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so you can refuse to answer specific questions, or decide to withdraw from the interview. Once the interview has been concluded, you can choose to withdraw your details at any time up to and including a period of 14 days after the interview.

All of the information you provide will be kept confidential and anonymous, and will be available only to me. Once the interview is completed, the recording will immediately be transferred to an encrypted laptop and wiped from the recording device. The interview will then be transcribed by me, and all identifying information will be removed. Once this is done, the audio-recording will also be deleted and only the anonymized transcript will remain. This will be stored on the University College Cork OneDrive system and subsequently on the UCC server. The data will be stored for a minimum of ten (10) years. I may, however, request your consent to store the anonymized data in a data repository indefinitely to allow the data to be used for subsequent research studies. This would not happen without your prior approval. The information will be used in my thesis, and may contribute to research publications and/or conference presentations.

I do not anticipate any negative outcomes from participating in this study. At the end of the procedure, I will discuss with you how you found the experience. Should you experience distress arising from the interview, the contact details for support services provided below may be of assistance.

This study has obtained ethical approval from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any queries about this research, you can contact me at this email address: 72703166@umail.ucc.ie.

Please sign the Consent Form enclosed with this Information Sheet.

UCC University College Cork, Ireland Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh	Autonomy in Irish local government: the impact on cultural services Interviews with Practitioners

Consent Form

I……agree to participate in William M. Ronayne's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with William M. Ronayne to be audio-recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within 14 days of the data collection, i.e. the interview with William M. Ronayne, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

I agree to taking part in the interview according to the terms set lout above ☐

I agree to the interview being recorded Yes ☐ No ☐

Signed: ……..... Date: ……..

PRINT NAME:

CKM11 Masters by Research, Government & Politics

Autonomy in Irish Local Government

Interviews with Practitioners

May 2020 –

No. of interview

Name of person interviewed

Position / Role

Introduction

International comparisons, in particular the work of Ladner, Keufer, and Baldersheim (2016), have shown that the degree of local autonomy is very low in Ireland, the second lowest in a review of 39 European countries. These authors devised a framework to objectively measure autonomy. The lowest value measured is 9.2, the highest 29.76. On their scale Ireland measured just 12.67.

Tom Barrington, respected author on Irish local government posed the questions many years ago: for central government is local diversity a cause for suspicion?

The insights and opinions of persons who either currently work in local government, or have done, will be extremely valuable in determining whether or not the lack of autonomy has a measurable effect on the range and quality of cultural provision. This survey is in five main sections.

Liam Ronayne

Student No. 72703166

Email 72703166@umail.ucc.ie

A Questions on local self rule
Local self rule is regarded as key to real autonomy. These questions focus on three aspects of local self rule, as defined by Ladner et al (2016).

Question 1

In your working life have you experienced occasions when local government lacked the institutional depth to meet the needs of local community / local authority area?

By 'institutional depth' is meant "capacities that allow local decision-makers to respond to the collective preferences of local citizens".

If yes, would you give two or three examples? If not, please indicate in your response.

Response

Question 2

In your working life have you experienced occasions when local government lacked the policy scope to meet the needs of local community / local authority area?

By 'policy scope' is meant "range of functions (tasks) where local government is effectively involved in the delivery of services".

If yes, would you give two or three examples? If not, please indicate in your response.

Response

Question 3

In your working life have you experienced occasions when local government lacked effective political discretion on important matters?

By ‘effective political discretion’ is meant “the extent to which local government has real influence over these functions”.

If yes, would you give two or three examples? If not, please indicate in your response.

Response

In your responses to the questions in this section I would be especially interested in examples relating to cultural policy and practice.

B Questions on effectiveness of local government

Question 4

While accepting that perceptions of autonomy are subjective, in your working life have you experienced occasions when the level of autonomy present in local government prevented the carrying out of a specific initiative or project which you believed was needed by the city or local area?

Response

Question 5

In your experience have you found that Irish local government is less or more effective and efficient that it would otherwise be, given the degree of centralised controls in place? Would you give two or three examples to illustrate your experience?

Response

In your responses to the questions in this section I would be especially interested in examples relating to cultural policy and practice.

C Questions on central / local relations

Question 6

In your experience working in local government have you encountered occasions when the lack of organizational autonomy has impacted negatively on the work of the authority?

> By 'organizational autonomy' is meant the extent to which the authority is, or is not, free to decide about its own organization or structures.

If yes, would you give two or three examples? If not, please indicate in your response.

Response

Question 7

In your experience working in local government have you encountered occasions when administrative supervision from a higher level was excessive and prevented the local authority from carrying out necessary initiatives or projects?

If yes, would you give two or three examples? If not, please indicate in your response.

In your responses to the questions in this section I would be especially interested in examples relating to cultural policy and practice.

Response

D Questions on fiscal autonomy

Question 8

In your working life in local government have you experienced occasions when the lack of fiscal autonomy presented significant obstacles.

a) For example have there been occasions when the local authority was prevented from carrying out initiatives or projects, which you and/or colleagues deemed necessary, because of an inability to raise or vary local taxes or charges?
b) For example have there been occasions when the local authority was prevented from carrying out initiatives or projects, which you and/or colleagues deemed necessary, because of an inability to borrow the necessary funding?

If yes in either a) or b), or both, would you give a number of examples? I would be especially interested in examples relating to cultural policy and practice.

Response

E Questions: General

Question 9

According to Wolman and Goldsmith (1990) "different degrees of local autonomy have consequences for local government efficiency and performance […] as well as for local accountability, local democracy or even the well-being of citizens".

Would you comment on this, in particular in relation to cultural policy and practice?

Response

Question 10

In your working life in local government have you experience of working with other European cities / partners? If yes

- have you a view on whether we are performing better or less well than countries of similar size in Europe?
- are there any lessons in terms of local autonomy which we might learn from other countries, and implement in this country?

Response