

New Programme for Government

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Following approval by both parties in Government, a new Programme for Government was agreed late in 2009. The Programme aims to take account of the radically different situation Ireland finds itself in compared to the original Programme for Government, agreed in 2007.

The Taoiseach Brian Cowen TD described the Renewed Programme for Government as the “blueprint to meet the challenges we now face”. Minister for the Environment and Green Party leader, John Gormley TD, stated that “the Programme will redirect the work of government to better tackle economic recession and address the serious environmental challenges ahead. It will help protect and create jobs while also aiming to restore public confidence in politics.”

The Programme does contain general commitments in several areas related to local government, although there are relatively few specifics. However, in some areas it does indicate a shift in emphasis in terms of the focus of investment, given the considerable restrictions in public finances.

It is not clear, however, how the new Programme for Government tallies with other recent proposals, particularly those in the McCarthy report on public expenditure reductions published in July which, for example, proposed closing down some programmes entirely such as the Rural Transport Scheme and the RAPID and CLÁR programmes. The Programme states that, in correcting the public finances, the government “will take account of the findings” of the McCarthy report and the Commission on Taxation, “while creating room for targeted spending and taxation

initiatives that can be demonstrated to promote economic renewal”.

Local Finance

The Programme states that Government will introduce a new local government financing system to ensure the viability of local services and to ensure implementation of Government policy on local government reform.

The two government parties make a general commitment to “move to introduce” a Site Valuation Tax for non-agricultural land, covering both residential and commercial properties – starting with the necessary valuation and registration process. Unlike the property tax proposed by the Commission on Taxation, such a tax would by definition be based on the site or land value, rather than the property or any construction built upon the land – for example, property that might be developed in future would not necessarily incur any additional tax liability. In subsequent interviews, Government representatives indicated that the amount to be paid would be determined by factors such as the size of the site, the zoning of the land, and the location. One option being considered is to task the Land Registry and Ordnance Survey with developing a valuation system for the tax. This proposed Site Valuation Tax would replace commercial rates and be a source of financing for the local government system. It would also be used to offset stamp duty on residential property.

It also proposes that a charging system for treated water be introduced which will be fair and easy to apply. Under the proposals, households would be allocated a basic volume of water free of charge, with charges applying for water use in excess of the allowance, to incentivise conservation. Such a system would obviously depend on the

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installation of meters in households. The Programme also states that “in keeping with the allocation of greater responsibility to local government, Local Authorities will set their own rates for water use”.

Transport

The new Programme for Government states that the capital investment programme will be revised by the end of 2009 to take account of the new budgetary situation, as well as the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The Programme signals the need for a significant shift in emphasis from roads to public transport. Once completion of payments is made for the major motorways programme in 2011, the Government states that “the ratio of expenditure on new Transport 21 projects between public transport and the national roads programme will be 2:1 in favour of public transport”.

The Programme states that it will seek to deliver on the commitments in “Smarter Travel” and the “National Cycle Policy Framework” (see *Local Authority Times*, Vol 12, No.4, 2008 and Vol. 13, Nos 3 & 4, 2009 for details). Rapid transport studies will be carried out for Cork, Galway, Waterford and Limerick, with a view to providing a high quality, integrated and accessible public transport service to within 800 metres of each household. Real time passenger information will be available at over 500 bus stops in Dublin and Cork by the end of 2010, and extended to bus stops in Limerick, Galway and Waterford in 2011.

Work will continue on rail projects such as the Western Rail Corridor (Phase 1), the Kildare line upgrade, the Navan line (Phase 1), and the Dublin city re-signalling project, with a

commitment to continue work on subsequent phases of the Western Rail Corridor and Navan rail line. The Programme states that the DART interconnector and Metro North will be completed by 2016. Construction that has already commenced on extensions to the Luas line will continue, with planning and design continuing on Metro West and the Bray, Lucan and cross-city Luas connections, “with a view to earliest possible delivery”.

The Government will explore the potential for a full-scale rural transport system drawing on the resources of Bus Éireann, the school transport system, and financial resources currently spent by the HSE and the Department of Education.

In terms of road projects other than the major inter-urban routes, a review of completion dates and road standards on 94 road projects at design stage or earlier will be conducted in the context of the current budgetary situation, falling road usage, and climate change objectives. New design standards for national secondary routes will take account of economic and environmental circumstances. The Programme states that the eastern by-pass of Dublin is off the agenda as far as the current Government is concerned.

However, the Programme adds that investment in enhancing and maintaining the regional and local road network will continue “to protect the existing investment and service new housing, industrial and commercial development and to open up areas for tourism”. A significant proportion of the budget for road improvements will be allocated to the provision of new footpaths. A new All-Ireland Walkways Development Plan to develop routes and infrastructural

needs is also to be published. Bray-Balbriggan and Oranmore-Barna cycling and pedestrian routes are to be developed for use by both commuters and tourists.

The Programme also indicates that Government will examine the potential for introducing a road pricing strategy (something also suggested by the Commission on Taxation), as well as a system of preferential parking and charging for electric cars.

The number of safety cameras will be extended at national black spots and dangerous sections of the road network.

Housing

A review of housing policy is to be conducted given the changed housing market and budgetary situation. The Programme proposes to develop a long-term strategy of land acquisition. The Programme emphasises the need to ensure that rented accommodation is an attractive tenure option for households, and a new “community housing” tenure is suggested.

The Government also commits to implementation of “The Way Home” to eliminate homelessness (see *Local Authority Times*, Vol. 12, No 3, 2008 for further details).

Environmental Protection, Energy Efficiency, and Planning

The Programme for Government states that preserving water resources and reducing waste will become increasingly important responsibilities of local government.

Investment will continue in water infrastructure, and levels of unaccounted for water will be reduced to levels in line with international best practice. The Programme also states

that a new licensing and inspection system will be introduced for septic tanks and wastewater treatment systems.

Government also states that a new waste policy will be published following the current review. In addition, a specific strategy on food and biodegradable waste will be implemented. The Government also states that it will put a cap on incineration capacity.

A new Climate Change Bill will set a target of a 3% annual reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, and each Government Department will be asked to take responsibility for ensuring the necessary changes are made to meet this target in their field of activity. A Climate Change Adaptation Strategy will also be introduced to identify the necessary measures to adapt to the challenges of climate change.

New public procurement guidelines are to be produced to ensure that green criteria are reflected in all state procurement decisions.

A “Smart Town” of over 1,000 homes is to be selected where energy companies will test new smart grids and energy-efficient applications.

The Programme also pledges to “ensure a strong and uniform planning enforcement regime across all Local Authorities to ensure effective oversight and enforcement levels”. A commitment is also made to fully implement the EU Habitats and Birds Directives, as well as introducing a new licensing system for quarries.

New planning legislation will be introduced to prevent local authorities from “de-listing” buildings of national or regional importance from the Record of Protected Structure without

the approval of the Minister for the Environment.

The Government also commit to ratifying the Aarhus Convention, which gives the public a general right of information and participation in environmental and planning decisions, as well as access to judicial review of environmental and planning decisions in the courts.

Local Development

The Programme promises to establish “Community and Development Agencies” as one-stop-shops for advice on grant supports, business opportunities, training and development, and to manage grant spending under EU rural development funding for locally-based rural enterprises.

The RAPID and CLÁR programmes are to be continued, although the Programme states that given economic constraints investment may have to be focused on priority local needs.

The Government promises to undertake a review of the effectiveness of state supports for businesses, including the interaction between IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, and the County/City Enterprise Boards. The Community Employment Programme will also be reviewed, although there is a general commitment to support Community Employment Schemes providing benefits to local communities.

The Programme for Government also states that Government will “provide places in Local Authorities for participants on the new Work Experience Scheme to ensure that each town, city or county area can benefit from the skills of participants as they gain valuable work experience”.

A network of farmers’ markets at local

authority level is to be promoted to support more direct selling from producers to consumers.

Dublin is to be promoted as a key centre for the international conference market. In addition, a number of new sites are to be promoted for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List, including Clonmacnoise, Tara, the Burren, and Georgian Dublin.

The Programme proposes to hold one major international arts, culture or creative industry event each year from 2011 to 2016. Community arts schemes will be expanded, providing free physical space for visual artists and community groups to display their work. A new strategy for the provision of sports facilities will also be developed.

A commitment is made to provide broadband access to every home in Ireland by 2012, subject to the availability of EU funding. Open access to state-owned fibre-optic ducting and new housing developments will be provided through a one-stop-shop mechanism.

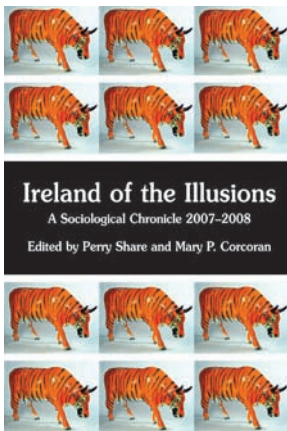
Democratic Reform and Public Service Reform

The Programme proposed to establish an independent Electoral Commission to determine constituency boundaries, administer voter registration, and run voter education programmes. The Commission will also be asked to propose reforms to the electoral system for the Dáil, Seanad, the European Parliament, and consider options for the timing of elections to these offices and to local authorities.

A commitment is also made to introduce a more open and transparent system for making appointments to public bodies, and to review the fee structure for making FOI requests.

In terms of public sector reform, the Programme for Government reiterates the Government's support for the proposals of both the OECD and the report of the Task Force on the Public Service, "Transforming Public Services" (see *Local Authority Times*, Vol. 13, Nos 1 & 2, 2009). These include a greater emphasis on performance based on outcomes, organisational and individual accountability, mobility and flexibility in deployment, joint working through networks, longer term planning, and sharing of infrastructure. The Programme points to the need for better use of public funds for capital projects, improving capacity for carrying out Cost Benefit Analysis, assessing environmental impacts, and conducting value for money reviews.

The Programme states that an independent review of the PMDS system will be carried out "with a view to allowing for a new system of performance-related pay in the public sector". Existing demarcations preventing mobility of staff between different parts of the public service will be removed, and a Senior Public Service as proposed by the OECD will be created, open to all parts of the public service, including local authorities and the HSE. All public service appointments to positions from Principal Officer or equivalent grade upwards will be opened up to all potential applicants.



A Land Tax System – How it Might Work

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In the present conflicted state of Irish society, proposals for new taxes are unlikely to be popular but it is probably true to say that government would wish to see local authorities less dependent on general taxation, the loss of revenue from residential property resulting from "the abolition of rates" being generally now regretted. The renewed Programme for Government contains a proposed Site Valuation Tax for non-agricultural land, not specifically intended as a local tax but rather as a "fair and stable basis" for offsetting stamp duty on residential property. A valuation and registration process is envisaged which is likely to take some years (with the added disadvantage for owners of the cost of valuations). What is outlined below could offer a simpler mechanism for raising tax with a potentially higher yield, as the tax would be applicable to all land, replacing to a large extent existing central government supports for local authorities. The mechanism would include measures to ensure that the tax operated to support environmental objectives.

Aims of a Land Tax

The proposed system aims to promote an efficient use of land, bearing in mind broad planning or environmental objectives, in an equitable manner that is simple to implement and to raise funds for local

government, thereby replacing State funding. Theoretically, the existing system of rates would end but State support for certain capital projects such as water schemes would continue.

Scope

The tax would apply to all land, save public roads in charge (but not toll roads) and local authority water and sewerage schemes, rivers, lakes and waterways. Allowance (but not exemption) would be made for amenities of public value, e.g. amenity woodlands, protected structures and their immediate curtilage, and/or public access to land or buildings.

Calculation of the Tax

The basis for the tax is that the funds raised should equal the total cost of services provided by local government divided by the total taxable land, giving a unit value applied by square metre/hectare. The rate would apply regardless of actual use. Total revenue for local authorities in 2005 exceeded €4000 million, which included more than €1000 million from goods and services. Although revenue under this head is likely to be much reduced while the economy is in decline, sales of goods and services (particularly if augmented by revenue from metering of residential water use) will reduce the total to be raised, though no allowance is made for this in the test examples below.

Differentiation by Zones

It would be necessary to take account of varying potential productivity of land by positive or negative differentials applied to the unit value by broad zones. The zones (which should be extensive and minimum in number) would reflect the following:

- Grades of productivity of agricultural land. In the interests of

simplicity, the zones should be extensive, generally follow townland boundaries, take median productivity and avoid fragmentation. The number of grades should be restricted (say four to six maximum);

- Urban core (generally to be taken as the town/city up to 1900 or between the canals in Dublin);
- Suburban land; this would include all zoned land and land in rural areas not in agricultural use (excepting farmhouses). In the larger cities, it would be necessary to have sub zones reflecting different values; the differential could be calculated from typical prices for a standard 3-bed house.

Because of the cultural and social values attaching to town centres, the age of buildings and the relative inflexibility in developing land, the differential applying in the core zone should be more favourable than that which would apply in the suburbs.

In the major cities (Dublin, possibly Cork) the core zone may need subdivision to reflect hotspots (Grafton Street, Henry Street) or particularly deprived areas.

Administering the Tax

The main task initially would be to set out the zones and the differentials applying to each, bearing in mind that the total yield should equate to total local government expenditure ideally. This task could be undertaken by a land commission (either independently or associated with the land registry) using a task force comprising land use and administrative experts, including town planners, agricultural advisors and valuers. In a typical rural local authority area, the number of zones might be quite limited e.g. town core and two or three of agricultural land. Definition of suburban zones would not be necessary, as all non-agricultural land use outside the urban cores would be taxed on the same basis. Thus, the delineation of zones would be relatively simple. Initially, the differentials might be based directly on generalised land values, but would need adjustment over time to take account of the yield. Thus, periodic review is essential.

Special measures may be needed to deal with possible consequences which include increased pressures for higher densities/high rise, high value commercial rather than industrial or residential development, and

redevelopment of existing lower rent business property and older buildings.

Following the publication of the scheme, landowners would be obliged to assess their liability and to make payment, which would be accompanied on the first payment or, with any subsequent change to the holding, by a map showing the land to which the payment relates. Payment would be made to the local authority who would be obliged to maintain a map registry. Land on which no tax is paid over a period (say five years) would be forfeit to the Land Commission.

Local authorities would be entitled to appeal the scheme to the Land Commission and, failing satisfaction, to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Individual landowners would be able to appeal to their local authority the inclusion of their property in a particular zone. If the local authority accepted the case, representations would be made by them to the Land Commission to amend the zone. The landowner, if unsatisfied by the process, could appeal to the courts.

Some examples of how the tax might work are given overleaf.



Focus Ireland recently won an Irish Council of Social Housing award for excellence in design, management, community development and sustainability for its Cluain Ghlas housing development in Waterford. Pictured with the award at the development are Focus Ireland Waterford Manager David Niblock, Lar Power, Director of Services with Waterford City Council, along with others involved in the development, and several Cluain Ghlas residents.

Test

A. Total LA expenditure ('05)	€4040m
B. Land Area of State (includes roads, water)	70,000 sq. km
Unit rate A/B	€577/hectare (say €600)

Example 1

Assuming lowest agricultural zone at 0.05 differential:

Liability of hill farmer with 200 hectares	€6000 (reduced if public access)
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Example 2

Suburban land (general) at differential of 10:

Shopping centre on 5 hectares	€30000
House on .05 hectares	€300
Rural house on 0.5 hectares	€3000

Example 3

Top suburban land (Dublin) at differential of 50:

Shopping centre on 10 hectares	€300,000
House on 0.5 hectares	€15,000 (reduction, if protected structure)

Example 4

Provincial town centre at differential of 8:

Shop on 0.25 hectares	€1200
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Some Potential Problems

Who sets the unit rate?

Setting up the scheme in the short term is not difficult. A figure for Total Expenditure can be based on current levels with any necessary immediate adjustment. In the longer term, keeping pace with needs, inflation etc., presents problems if the figure is determined by central government solely or the local authorities solely. Central government will be anxious to ensure that expenditure remains within guidelines; allowing an increase in the unit rate is likely to be as unpopular as forcing a decrease is likely to be popular. Central government has been content to see local government revenues decline.

Conversely, local authorities collectively would have every incentive to increase the unit rate without improving efficiency in delivery of services.

A land commission (which might include representatives of the collective local authorities and ratepayers) could strike the unit rate with the power to overrule by the DEHLG Minister if performance criteria are not met and veto by the Dept of Finance only if EU rules are breached.

Geographically large, low-income authorities

Provision may be needed for limited redistribution from high income per capita authorities or a general levy on all rate revenue at say five per cent for redistribution.

Local authorities with extensive social housing

The need for services is greater in these authorities, while the potential income is reduced. The rates for a local authority house, not tenant purchased, should therefore be paid by the State.

The above differentials are selected at random without reference to the total product. Actual differentials would need to be arrived at by summing the product for each zone, rebalancing to ensure the total matches budgetary needs in a reasonable way.

Unintended planning effects

It is anticipated that the tax payable by commercial users would fall relative to what they now pay in rates. The unit charge is the same for commercial and residential users. Measures might be necessary to counter pressure for increased densities as, for example, taxing usable floor areas/number of residential units above a limit in certain circumstances.

Sports grounds, schools

In acknowledgement of their social value and limited resources, non-fee paying schools and sports grounds, including small capacity stadia, could be levied at the rate applying in an agricultural zone. Although private health clubs should be treated as any other non-agricultural use, should golf clubs be levied at an agricultural rate? Perhaps a threshold based on membership fees could operate.

Rural housing

Treating rural housing as suburban results in relatively high taxes for large sites. Allowance could be made for

existing contributions to school transport schemes (there are grounds for arguing that school transport should be administered by local authorities in any case).

Environmental objectives

In time, the scheme could be modified to reflect external costs of land use, according to how far the land was a net producer or assimilator of wastes. The principle would be to tax land at variable rates reflecting the net waste generation characteristics of the use.

Submitting maps

This could be difficult for elderly or infirm landowners. In general, most of the population probably have had experience of submitting maps for planning permission, farm grants or other schemes.

Conclusion

Introduction of a land tax is one of a number of potentially linked reforms of local government but it is one that can be brought in independently.

Although the merits of a land tax have been argued often, government has baulked in the same way it has to boundary extensions and other reforms of local government. A system that draws revenue from all landowners (making it more difficult for any single interest group to seek to opt out) and relieves central government of the need to finance local government directly may seem quite attractive in the current financial crisis. Central government would still contribute by reason of its landholdings and contribution for tenanted council housing. It is possible that, because the tax base is as wide as possible, the amount of rates payable by businesses, for example in small sites in central areas, may reduce, which could be helpful in enabling them to survive. On the other hand, the wasteful use of land in the provision of large surface carparks would be penalised. The system could also go some way towards reducing derelict land, an objective in previous, largely unimplemented, legislation.

A Snapshot of Equality and Intercultural Communication

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Background

The most recent complete national population census carried out by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) was conducted in April 2006. Four years have passed since this data was collected. At the time the number of “non-Irish nationals” was recorded as 420,000 or approximately 10% of the population. This figure only included

those legally resident within the state. Given that we live in much changed times economically it was interesting to note that data published by the Central Statistics Office on 22 September 2009 (using the 2006 census as base data line) provided a snapshot of current and, indeed, changing demographics within the Republic of Ireland. The most striking statistic was the one which showed that Ireland has experienced outward migration for the first time since 1995. In simple terms this means that a greater number of people left the State

in the year between April 2008 and April 2009 than the number who came to live here. In addition, it highlighted the fact that the number of emigrants from the State in the year to April 2009 increased by over 40 per cent.

It is now during times of economic difficulty that the issues of equality, diversity and discrimination can come very much to the fore for public service organisations. Issues of equality and diversity will remain central to the work of local authorities and other such public service providers into the

future irrespective of national demographic trends or economic change. While a significant element of these areas is driven by the goals of social inclusion, many are matters of obligatory compliance with Irish and European legislation. Failure to comply can be costly in financial terms.

In discussion or debate in the fields of equality, diversity or interculturalism, each one a significant subject in its own right, use of language or terminology has at times been a somewhat contentious factor. On occasion it is argued that these areas have become more concerned with the use of appropriate terms rather than actual issues themselves, a certain “semantic hygiene” in a sense. At times this has led to some people being reluctant to contribute to discussion for fear of “using the wrong word” or “saying the wrong thing”, and the associated fear of subsequently being labelled in some way. A result of this is that many who could make a significant contribution to the issue remain silent and their potential input to the issue is lost. Unfortunately this can result in the agenda being driven by certain elements of the tabloid press and others whose interests and agenda are at times questionable at best. From time to time one hears the line “I know it’s not politically correct but...” as a prelude to comments that in some instances do not require extensive examination to discern the offensiveness contained therein.

This is not to say that language and terminology are not important. They are critical, and one must acknowledge and be mindful of how they can be used to offend, exclude or discriminate against certain groups. Training and awareness-raising in the area would be incomplete if they failed to provide clarification of certain associated terminology and vocabulary. For example, the familiar words “refugee”

and “asylum seeker” are frequently misunderstood or in other instances portrayed as interchangeable or simply misrepresented.

On a related note, there are certain terms such as “non-national” which are frequently heard in various media and discussion, whereas the term “foreign national” could be considered a more appropriate term as almost everyone has a nationality from somewhere. There is a view that, where possible, and with the exception of comparative data such as a census, it is more appropriate to define people by what they are rather than by what they are not. An example of the inconsistency of terms used is evident in the common application of the term “undocumented” to Irish nationals in the United States who find themselves in the difficult and unenviable situation of being unable to return to Ireland for a family event or occasion for fear of not being admitted back into the US. Yet rarely is the term “undocumented” used to describe those in Ireland at present without the documentation entitling them to reside and/or work here. The term “illegal immigrant” is used more often in this context.

Some Local Authority Initiatives

Language and terminology are only aspects of these wide-ranging subject areas and topics. Service providers in the public sector are interacting on a daily basis with a very diverse client group and this has presented opportunities and challenges to those operating in such environments. In addition to the provision of training for staff, local authorities have been to the fore in running initiatives and programmes to address key related issues such as stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. A stereotype is a belief that all members of a given group share the same fixed personality traits or characteristics as a result of

membership of this group. Stereotypes are based on oversimplified generalisations of a group. Understanding our own proneness to stereotype is vital if we are to play a role in promoting the inclusion of others and minimising prejudice and discrimination. We can define prejudice as the view or opinion, discrimination as the action.

Events such as the “Living Library”, run in autumn of last year by South Dublin County Library as part of South Dublin County Council’s South Dublin Innovates programme, is one example of a local initiative to address such challenges. This event encouraged visitors to the library to “Take out a Prejudice”. Visitors were encouraged to “borrow a living book”, that is a person with a certain social, ethnic, occupational or cultural background and to spend some time discussing background, lifestyle and other issues and to ask questions they might normally feel reluctant to ask. In November of 2009 South Dublin County Council’s Social Inclusion Unit organised a highly attended and successful Social Inclusion Week.

Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council’s Social Inclusion Week included an open day at the main Garda Station in Dún Laoghaire where families and communities were encouraged to come and visit the Garda station to see the range of services the Garda Siochána provide and to observe how and what they contribute to the community. In addition, a seminar was run in Dún Laoghaire by the IPA with the South Dublin Travellers Action Group to promote awareness of equality and diversity with a particular emphasis on Traveller culture.

Kildare County Council ran a very well attended Multicultural Family Day in June of 2009. As part of this initiative I was invited to chair a discussion workshop on “Experiences of Diversity

in County Kildare". This workshop provided a forum for members of a variety of communities to express their opinions on a wide range of issues including access to education and healthcare along with views on which services and initiatives had been particularly helpful and useful to their communities, together with suggestions for practical ways in which minority ethnic groups can contribute to the communities in which they reside.

Equality Considerations and the Law

The government's 43 per cent reduction in funding to the Equality Authority in 2008, together with the closing of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), at the very least beg serious questions regarding government priorities in relation to the whole field of equality and social inclusion at present and into the future.

Considerations for service providers in the area of equality centre primarily, but not exclusively, around two pieces of legislation outlawing discrimination in the workplace and in the provision of services. These are the Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2007 and the Equal Status Acts 2000 & 2004. Discrimination under the Acts occurs where a person is treated less favourably than another person is, has been or would be treated in a comparable situation on any of the nine grounds of the Equality Acts. These nine grounds (in both Employment Equality and Equal Status Acts) are: gender, marital status, family status, age, sexual orientation, religious belief, disability, race, nationality or ethnic origin and membership of the Traveller community.

"Equality of opportunity" means recognising the differences between people, realising that some people face particular difficulties, challenging

prejudice and discrimination, and working out what additional action we need to take to ensure that people have equal access to jobs and services. "But I treat everyone the same, so what's the problem?" is a refrain that has been heard with some frequency but of course the difficulty here is that aiming to treat everyone the same assumes everyone has the same needs, an invalid and misinformed assumption that service providers from their experience will know well. Examples include the obligations relating to the provision of services in a number of languages, and access for people with disabilities (a commitment required under the Disability Act 2005) which are central to equality policies, Citizen and Customer Charters, as well as Dignity at Work Charters in most local authorities and organisations across the Irish public service. The key factor is the avoidance of treating certain individuals or groups less favourably.

A sample local authority Customer and Citizen Charter states: "the aim is to deliver services with courtesy and minimum delay in a climate of mutual respect between provider and customer, and to respect the rights of minorities". Attention should be drawn to the mutuality of respect referred to above, as service providers have the right as employees to expect the same entitlements that customers expect. This mutuality of respect is best reflected in the often quoted phrase "diversity is about 'us', not about 'them'".

Training delivered by the IPA in the areas of equality and diversity has included a focus on raising awareness of obligations and rights set out under the legislation, as well as exploration of the issues of stereotyping and prejudice, and awareness of the diversity of national and other cultures. Issues and questions raised by participants on such training programs have included

a need to be clear on what actually constitutes discrimination and, crucially, what is not discriminatory and within the right of the employee or service provider. Issues arising have included the fear of accusations of discrimination being made and the importance of staff and individual providers being confident of their own rights.

At another level, issues of governance within the public and private sectors have been gaining significant prominence and attention of late for a variety of reasons, not least the absence of effective governance in some well publicised cases. The relevance here is the responsibility of board members for overseeing practices within their organisations and ensuring that discrimination is not occurring, not to mention the issue of vicarious liability.

In the area of intercultural communication training, an enormous subject area in itself, the main focus has been on national and regional cultural factors and differing forms of communication style and their subsequent effects on customer interaction, service and delivery, highlighting the importance of training and an awareness of cultural difference.

Culture and Intercultural Communication

Culture has been defined in this context as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" and corresponds to the use of the term in the field of anthropology. "Software of the mind" is a well known term in the field, coined by Geert Hofstede, the Dutch social psychologist. Of course culture in this sense takes many forms, that of gender, age, nationality, religion, socio-economic status, or indeed political culture, to name but a few.

Intercultural communication factors of direct relevance to service providers include non-verbal communication and behaviour as well as verbal behaviour, in other words, the use and interpretation of eye contact, tone and intonation and cultural differences in the manner of expressing politeness. Non-verbal behaviour includes all the ways we send and receive information without using language. We are frequently unaware of a signal or signals we send. Service users might perceive behaviours to mean something other than that which is intended. In addition, we may not be aware of how we react to others based on our interpretation of non-verbal behaviours which vary from culture to culture. It is important to understand the meanings these situations could have for our customers/clients/service users.

Styles and ways of communicating (both verbal and non-verbal) are not universal and can vary significantly among national and other forms of culture. In an intercultural context one person's humour may be another person's insult. One needs to be aware of cultural differences in people's sense of humour and the acceptability or not of "banter" in a professional context. Non-verbal communication is also a frequent source of intercultural misunderstanding. For example, it is not always acceptable to make eye contact in certain situations. Within some cultures, such as the Native American or certain East Asian and African cultures, it is frequently considered disrespectful to maintain significant eye contact with a person considered to be in a position of authority. This can easily be misinterpreted in the communication culture of Western countries. Equally, politeness or what is considered to be polite is not expressed or demonstrated culturally in the same

ways in all situations. To take one example, queuing and the expectations of how it is carried out vary enormously, as many will have observed on their own travels, as norms of personal space/distance vary significantly among national and regional cultures. In addition, it is not universally acceptable to speak in certain tones in particular situations. Another example of where cultural difference can easily be misinterpreted is the use of silence and how that silence is interpreted as respect and consideration or conversely as lack of interest or disengagement from the issue at hand.

Assumptions made to date by public service providers have included:

- The customer has general knowledge and familiarity with our service;
- The customer understands our process (how things get done around here);
- The customer will understand the language being used; or
- The customer will be comfortable with the behaviour demonstrated.

While there is significant debate regarding the degree of responsibility to be taken by host and other

communities in relation to integration, there can be no doubt that promoting awareness of different national and other cultures, including those of minority ethnic groups, aids best practice in the provision of service. Public service providers traditionally operated on the basis that those who need the services would find their way to them. This has now given way to the view that providers need to take positive action to reach out to "harder-to-reach groups", and in many instances constitute matters of legal compliance as well as best practice.

James Connington delivers training in the areas of equality, diversity and intercultural communication to local authorities, state agencies and other public sector bodies, for employees or as part of specific social inclusion initiatives. Training has focused on awareness of equality legislation, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination together with factors of intercultural communication and how they impact on customer service and service provision. James is the IPA representative to SIETAR (Europa) (The Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research). For more information email jconnington@ipa.ie or phone (01) 2403679.



Workshops at Kildare County Council's Multicultural Day, June 2009

Housing Key to Migrant Integration

Sinead McGinley,
Focus Ireland

The relationship between housing and integration is important, in that housing location and type can impact on access to services, local community facilities and social networks. Poor quality housing can work against integration, and inadequate housing can negatively impact on the health and well-being of minority ethnic groups.

The importance of the role of housing in the integration process is highlighted in a number of studies in Ireland, such as *Getting On: From Migration to Integration*, published in 2008 and commissioned by the Immigrant Council of Ireland, which recommends improved access to low-cost housing and the regulation of the private housing sector in order to avoid social tensions. In the context of the current recession, integration of migrants must remain a priority in order to avoid the potential pitfalls of segregation. The provision of good quality housing as a determinant of the inclusion of migrants is a relatively recent objective in Ireland. *Migration Nation: Statement on Integration Strategy and Diversity Management*, which was launched by the Minister for Integration in 2008, states that “if core services such as employment, education, health and housing are delivered successfully and equitably to the new communities, then the chances of successful integration are greatly increased”.

Focus Ireland and the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) both recognize the central role that appropriate housing plays in a migrant’s ability to feel at home in Ireland. The two organisations commissioned Dr Jane

Pillinger in 2008 to conduct an exploratory study, entitled *Making a Home in Ireland: Housing Experiences of Chinese, Indian, Lithuanian and Nigerian Migrants in Blanchardstown*, into the housing experiences and “housing careers” of migrants.

The study found that local authorities play a central role in supporting the integration of migrant communities. In the next year, local authorities will begin to revise their five-year Housing Action Plans and it is crucial that they respond with a view to building sustainable, clustered communities. The clustering of migrant communities is a natural occurrence that can help build sustainable communities. In order to avoid clusters becoming ghettos it is vital that there is investment in housing advice/information and local amenities that benefit the whole community.

Although the growth of the housing market (including housing quality in the privately rented sector) took place in the last decade along with a growth in migration to Ireland, it is clear from research by the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism that a number of challenges for housing and planning policy remain.

Blanchardstown, located in Fingal County Council, experienced the fastest population growth rate in Ireland in the 2006 Census, and migrants accounted for 22 per cent of the population (twice the proportion of the State as a whole). The four migrant groups chosen for the *Making a Home in Ireland* study reflect the various entry routes into Ireland, legal status, socio-cultural characteristics, and civic and political entitlements of migrants.

The qualitative research was participatory in nature, and five peer researchers living in the study area, and from the four migrant communities, conducted in-depth interviews with 40 migrants residing in Blanchardstown (i.e. 10 from each of the four communities studied in the research). The sample of interview participants reflects the diversity of the population in terms of age, gender, marital and family status, length of time living in Ireland, language skills, educational background, housing tenure, employment, and migration status.

The research found that housing quality, security of tenure, safety and security in the local neighbourhood, and access to information and local services varied between and within the four migrant communities.

Migrants living in Blanchardstown chose to live in the area primarily because of affordability of housing and proximity to work, and somewhat also because of social networks. The majority of individuals and households interviewed who lived in local authority housing, owner-occupied housing, and newly built premises to rent, reported good housing conditions (this was particularly the case in the Indian and Nigerian communities). However, most of the migrants were living in privately rented accommodation and reported serious problems including overcrowding, damp housing, insecurity of tenure, limited furnishings and landlords not carrying out repairs. One Nigerian respondent stated that their accommodation was “private rented and landlord did not care about maintaining house”.

People living on rent allowance experienced significant problems in

finding suitable and good quality accommodation. Several felt discriminated against by landlords and said they had to move regularly. It is interesting to note that the evidence from the housing pathways of the interviewees found that the quality of their accommodation tended to improve the longer a person had been resident in Ireland.

A migrant's "sense of home" and belonging can be affected by their legal status, ability to make long-term plans, and housing conditions. Having a sense of home was found in the study to be closely linked to a sense of belonging and connection and, in turn, to integration. For some, "home" was where their families lived in their countries of origin; while for others who planned to stay in the long-term, home was Blanchardstown. Those who felt the most integrated correspondingly also felt the most accepted and welcomed in their local community.

For many migrants, their level of integration into the local community

was impeded by a lack of information, poor access to services, language difficulties, different and long working hours, low pay, lack of acceptance by local people, lack of community facilities and cultural differences. One Chinese respondent discussing the extent to which they felt welcomed in their area stated: "different culture, different country and don't really communicate with each other". The most important factors that participants felt would facilitate integration into the local community were, being able to speak the English language well, having better access to local services and information, improved community facilities, and improved acceptance by the local community. Access to local services and information was found to be highest in the Nigerian community and lowest in the Chinese community. Legal status also impacts on access to good quality housing. For some interviewees, being undocumented meant that there was no possibility to complain about housing conditions or to have access to local services. For others, gaining legal status enabled

them to access local authority rented accommodation and home ownership.

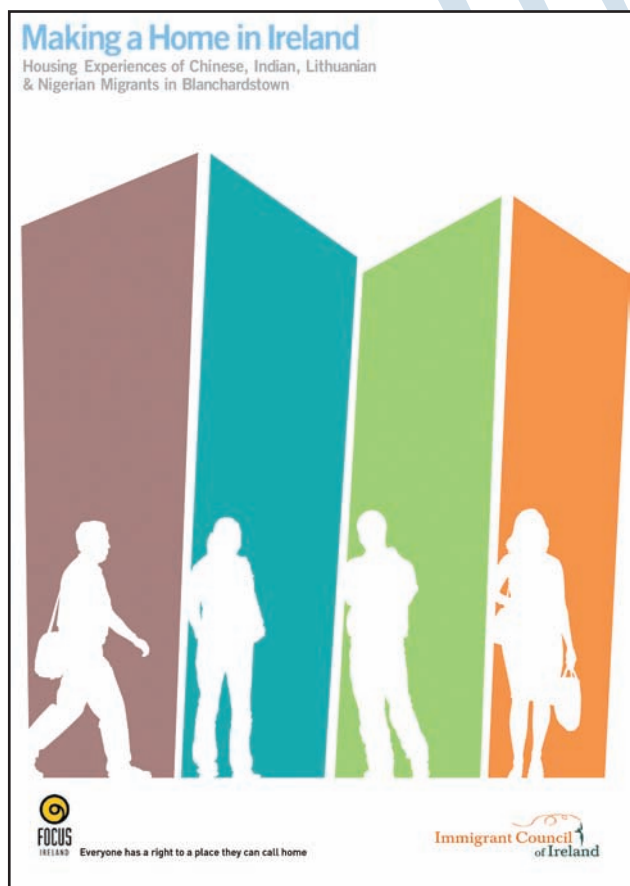
It is clear from the research that where people live and settle is important in determining their quality of life, access to services and long-term integration. Having access to good quality, sustainable and long-term housing options is a key issue that needs to be addressed in policy and housing provision. People living on rent allowance experienced some of the most significant problems in finding suitable and sustainable accommodation – landlords were found to be reluctant to rent to social welfare recipients.

Housing policies play a key role in influencing settlement patterns and housing provision, which in turn can impact on segregation and clustering. The role of local authorities is crucial in influencing a migrant's ability to settle into a home and community in Ireland. *Making a Home in Ireland* makes a number of recommendations for policy-makers and local authorities:



Focus Ireland and the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) held a celebration of migrant communities to mark the launch of the organisations' joint research titled Making a Home in Ireland. Pictured at the event are: Focus Ireland CEO, Joyce Loughnan, ICI Research and Integration Officer, Fidele Mutwarasibo, and Peer Researcher, Oluromade Olusa.

1. Recognition from policy-makers at a local and national level that clustering of migrant communities is positive, but active measures are required to prevent clusters from becoming ghettos.
2. Local authorities in partnership with other key stakeholders should ensure that local migrant integration issues, such as neighbourhood planning, estate management, transport, community policing, housing, health, education, employment and access to community facilities, are fully integrated into all areas of local government policy and strategy.
3. Local authority Housing Action Plans and Homeless Action Plans should include specific measures to promote integration of migrants.
4. Annual reports on integration of migrants into housing policy should be presented to Housing Strategic Policy Committees.
5. Greater resources for local authorities to carry out inspections in the private rented sector, and the enforcement of regulation of lettings, should be made available to provide better protection for people living in privately rented accommodation.
6. Local authority staff need training to accommodate ethnic diversity and opportunities for sharing and developing good practice approaches, and systems should be developed for collating data on ethnicity in housing allocations.
7. Local authorities, the Citizens Information Board, the HSE and other statutory agencies have key roles to play in working with and supporting local community groups, local area partnerships and NGOs working with migrants to source and provide information.



It is positive to note that the people living in local authority housing who took part in the research study reported good housing experiences. In addition, many of the interviewees believed that having access to owner occupation or local authority rented housing was the main way in which their accommodation could be improved.

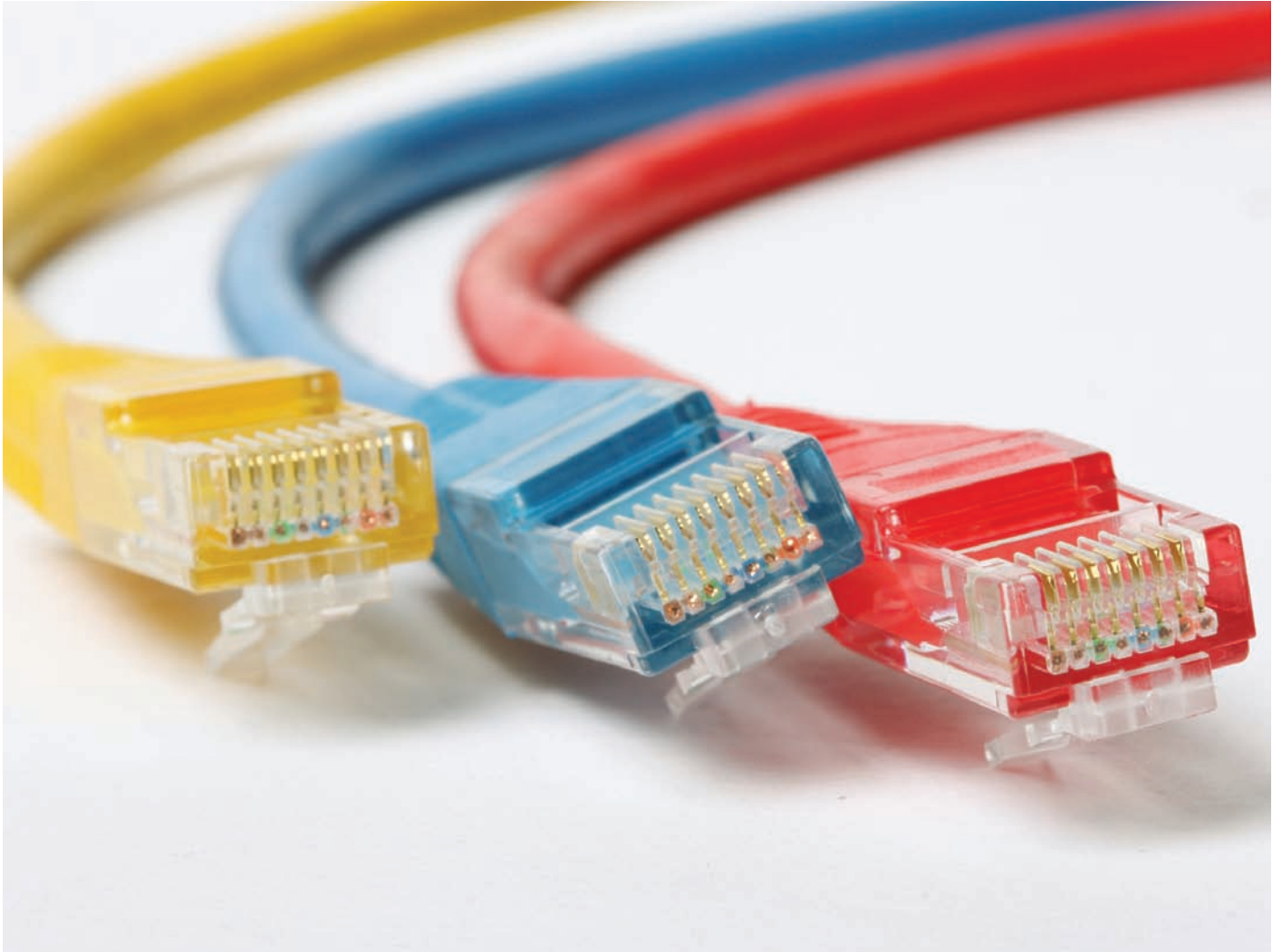
It is clear from the research that planning is key – new housing developments must be supported by integrated local services, including access to public transport, schools, and adequate community and recreational facilities which promote integration between communities. Migrant integration must be mainstreamed into housing policy and planning at both a national and local level to help improve integration and social inclusion for new communities. Improved access to suitable housing

and support services are central to supporting families to integrate into their new homes and communities.

Focus Ireland and the ICI hope that implementing *Making a Home in Ireland's* recommendations will reduce the isolation experienced by some migrants and enhance their sense of belonging. It would also help to build better connections between local people and new arrivals, as more migrants will feel at home in Ireland. While the report's recommendations address migrants' housing needs and experiences, many would if implemented also provide real benefits for communities in general.

Making a Home in Ireland: Housing Experiences of Chinese, Indian, Lithuanian and Nigerian Migrants in Blanchardstown can be downloaded from www.focusireland.ie

Getting the Most from Ireland's Investment in Fibre



Conal Henry,
CEO, e|net

Forfás, the IDA and Enterprise Ireland all agree that, for Ireland to be globally competitive again, we need a world class communications infrastructure. Whilst there is debate as to exactly how this is best achieved, there is a broad consensus that fibre optic networks are the way to go and that

the more businesses and consumers that have access to fibre the better. The good news is that the State has already invested in constructing a world-class fibre optic infrastructure in 93 cities and towns around Ireland – known as the Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs).

e|net operates the MANs on behalf of the State and does so in an “open access” fashion, which means all

telecoms companies wishing to provide services to consumers or businesses over the fibre network can. Currently, 35 of the telecoms companies operating in Ireland are using the MANs. As a result, competition has increased between the telcos, driving greater service innovation and reduced prices.

However, in many instances the money to fund the connections from the

fibre-optic ring to individual businesses was not included in the original capital funding. This means that businesses still need to pay to connect which, in some situations, can be costly and often acts as a barrier to subscription.

In order to address this issue, the relevant local authorities and e|net are working together to reduce the costs of direct connections. There are a number of areas in which local authorities can work together with e|net to ensure that connections to the MANs are maximised and that the full potential of the asset is realized:

- Road Opening Licences/Charges
- Planning Conditions
- Network Extensions
- Existing Council Ducts
- Use of Alternative Technologies
- MAN Network Mapping.

Road Opening Licences/Charges

Road opening charges and associated bonds can constitute a significant part of the cost of a customer connection. e|net has developed a solution which will give the Council the reassurance that quality work can be carried out in a timely and professional manner and in a spirit of cooperation.

Some local councils have led the way in putting standard and user friendly Road Opening Licence processes in place that result in a minimal financial burden to the end customers and also allows for timely and professional implementation of the broadband services.

Councils including Louth, Meath, Wexford, Waterford, Westmeath, Kilkenny, Carlow and Laois have agreed a simplified road opening licence process with an administrative charge only.

Planning Conditions

Many local authorities are now including a condition in planning permissions granted in MAN towns that requires developers of both commercial and residential properties to install carrier neutral/open access ducting for fibre optic-based services which include Broadband, Telephone, Television, CCTV and many other services. This ducting can then be connected to the existing MAN. Not only does this ensure that all occupiers have access to all current services available, but it future proofs all premises for potential technology developments rapidly coming down the line.

Network Extensions

In order to ensure that the existing MANs are extended to reach new developments and zoned areas, it is important that local councils consider adopting a policy of installing MAN ducting on all new roads projects, road realignments, resurfacing work as well as new footpath works. Again, this is currently happening with many councils.

Existing Council Ducts

Many local authorities have existing spare/unused ducting in roads and footpaths which could be used to bring the MAN network closer to customer premises – and indeed in some cases directly into customer premises. e|net is interested in exploring this issue further.

Another possible synergy could be that when the Council is carrying out ducting projects for their other utilities – water, sewage, drainage etc. – that they would consider installing MAN ducting at the same time.

Alternative Technologies

e|net are actively seeking alternative technologies that would allow them to deliver the physical connection to the

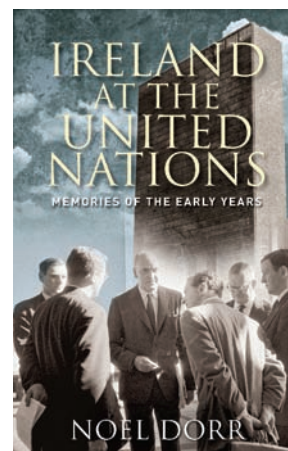
customer at costs significantly lower than the current standard trenching method. Included in the areas being explored are deploying fibre through the existing sewer networks as well as a method of installation using slit trenching, currently being used in many countries in Europe, the US and Canada.

MAN Network Mapping

As the MANs are extending and more customers are being connected to the network, e|net are updating the existing MAN network drawings, using differential GPS equipment to ensure the accuracy of the information and send regular updates to the Information Services section of the relevant local authorities.

This information can be made available to both council staff and external contractors for plant protection purposes – this will assist in avoiding unnecessary damage to the MAN network during any excavation works.

Conal Henry is CEO of e|net, an Irish owned and managed company which holds the concession to manage, maintain and operate Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs) of fibre optic built by the Government in 93 towns across the country. For more information see: www.e-net.ie



Meeting EU Water Quality Standards

Hilary Lawless, **Chemifloc**

Heightened public awareness about drinking water quality came to the fore during the extreme weather conditions of recent months. This increased awareness has been matched with a growing demand for potable water, prompted by the country's rapidly expanding population. This has placed a heavy burden on the existing water treatment infrastructure in Ireland. The consequence of this burden has manifested itself in a high degree of non-compliance with water quality requirements. Such shortcomings have resulted in numerous public health concerns which have heightened public awareness and given rise to a general lack of confidence in water supplies.

In December 2009, Shannon-based Chemifloc (www.chemifloc.com) became the first manufacturer of water treatment chemicals in Ireland to receive the Irish Standard Mark in

relation to three chemicals – aluminium sulfate, iron sulfate and aluminium iron sulfate – it supplies to Irish local authorities for purifying drinking water. This article outlines some of the measures that local authorities could take to improve drinking water quality and win back public confidence once again.

The Legislation

The EU Directive relating to the quality of water intended for human consumption is an obligatory instruction to National Governments to introduce appropriate legislation for drinking water quality. To this end, the legislation in Ireland is SI No. 278 of 2007 regulations, dated 12 June 2007. Duties of water suppliers stipulated in those regulations are as follows:

1. A water supplier shall ensure that the water is wholesome and clean and meets the requirements of the regulations.

2. For the purposes of paragraph (1) water shall be regarded as wholesome and clean if it is free from any micro-organisms and parasites and from any substances which in numbers or concentrations constitute a potential danger to human health.

The principal requirement for drinking water is that it be free of pathogens and toxic chemicals. The primary objective of water treatment is disinfection and one of the purposes of the prior stages of treatment is to prepare the water for disinfection. For example, chlorine is the most commonly used disinfectant and unless contaminants such as turbidity and colour, which exert a chlorine demand, are removed from the water, the efficacy of disinfection may be impaired.

The following table details all the chemical parameters which must be complied with under Regulation SI 278 of 2007:



Para No.	Parameter	Parametric Value	Units mg=milligram µg=microgram	Compliance Date
3	Acrylamide	0.10	µg/L	Now
4	Antimony	5.0	µg/L	Now
5	Arsenic	10	µg/L	Now
6	Benzene	1.0	µg/L	Now
7	Benzo(a)Pyrene	0.010	µg/L	Now
8	Boron	1.0	mg/L	Now
9	Bromate	10	µg/L	25 Dec 2008
10	Cadmium	5.0	µg/L	Now
11	Chromium	50	µg/L	Now
12	Copper	2.0	mg/L	Now
13	Cyanide	50	µg/L	Now
14	1,2-Dychloroethane	3.0	µg/L	Now
15	Epichlorohydrin	0.10	µg/L	Now
16	Fluoride	1.0	mg/L	Now
17	Lead	10	µg/L	25 Dec 2013
18	Mercury	1.0	µg/L	Now
19	Nickel	20	µg/L	Now
20	Nitrate	50	mg/L	Now
21	Nitrite	0.50	mg/L	Now
22	Pesticides	0.10	µg/L	Now
23	Pesticides-Total	0.50	µg/L	Now
24	Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons	0.1	µg/L	Now
25	Selenium	10	µg/L	Now
26	Tetrachloroethene & Trichloroethene	10	µg/L	Now
27	Trihalomethanes – Total	100	µg/L	25 Dec 2008
28	Vinyl Chloride	0.50	µg/L	Now

(Note the Compliance dates in the case of 3 parameters – bromate, lead and trihalomethanes (THM[®]).)

Chemical coagulation is the single most effective removal process that is conventionally applied to the production of drinking water. Chemical coagulation and flocculation is used for the removal of natural iron, natural aluminium, colour turbidity and algae from water. Coagulated and flocculated water is treated by sedimentation or flotation followed by rapid gravity filtration.

Cryptosporidium parasites at 4-6 μm in diameter, are too small to be removed without chemical coagulation. Removal relies on the achievement of effective chemical coagulation to incorporate such parasites into floc and efficient removal of floc by subsequent solids-liquid separation processes. This would be expected to achieve removal of 99% or more.

Inadequate chemical coagulation and flocculation result in poor performance of subsequent treatment processes. These processes (as well as chemical coagulation) need to be optimised to achieve maximum removal of raw water turbidity, colour, THM precursors and algae, and minimum carry-over of coagulant in the final water whilst minimising chemical usage.

Achieving good chemical coagulation and flocculation relies on the following:

- Good control of coagulant dose and pH to maintain optimum conditions particularly during the initial mixing stage. Under-dosing of coagulant or inadequate pH control produces poor floc, whilst overdosing increases the quantity of solids for removal and can in some cases produce large weak floc which can be difficult to remove efficiently;
- Good mixing at the point of chemical dosing to ensure rapid intimate contact between water and coagulant;
- Consideration of the influence of water temperature. At temperatures around 5°C or below coagulation

rates can be low, requiring 10-20 minutes longer for efficient coagulation to be achieved;

- Where mechanical flocculation is used optimum paddle speeds need to be determined;
- Avoidance of excessive shear after flocculation, which could result from weirs, pipe bends or constrictions, and high flow velocity (above 0.3m/s).

In order that removal of precursors is maximised it is important to utilise the correct coagulation conditions with respect to pH and coagulant dose.

This concept is not new, but in Ireland and the UK its application is not as widespread as it might be, because of additional costs for control equipment and chemicals. In the USA, the use of correctly optimised coagulation conditions is referred to as “enhanced coagulation”, because it achieves enhanced removal of organic compounds.

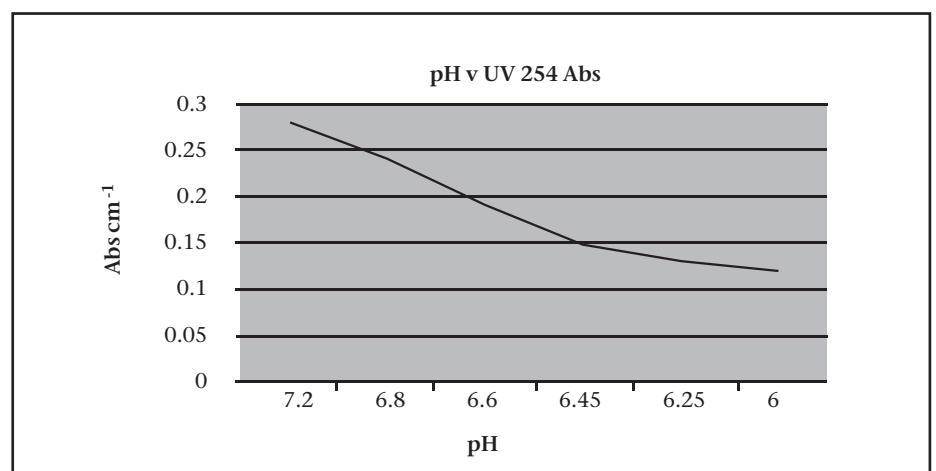
With the demands regarding THMs in the 2007 legislation, it is essential that “enhanced” coagulation with proper pH correction is carried out in Ireland. A large proportion of dissolved metal ion coagulant indicates unsuitable chemical conditions (particularly pH) or poor mixing. Large proportions of other dissolved metals indicate

incompatibility between pH conditions needed for coagulation and precipitation of other metals. In particular manganese precipitation can require a pH above 8, whereas the optimum pH for coagulation would be closer to 6.5.

The most appropriate coagulation conditions will depend on the type of water being treated and can be identified by use of suitable “jar tests”. Most operators of treatment works that use coagulation will determine the appropriate conditions from jar tests. Turbidity and residual coagulant have long been the water industry’s benchmarks for successful coagulation. However, when considering THM formation, the effectiveness of organic removal is best assessed by UV (254nm) measurement.

In general, chemical coagulation at the correct pH and flocculant dose will remove organic material and as a consequence will reduce the amount of THMs and bromates formed during subsequent chlorination. A further most important consequence is a dramatic reduction in the chlorine demand of the treated water and the resultant economic gain.

The use of UV absorbance (254nm) illustrates this result in the following chart.



Corrosion control, particularly with regard to reducing lead levels, is becoming a major issue in water treatment. It is possible to calculate the corrosion index of the treated water and, hence, the subsequent required pH correction which would lead to minimising metal levels such as copper and lead. Further treatment using phosphates in the form of Phosphoric Acid as a protective barrier is universally used for the control of lead in drinking water.

To promote increased consumer confidence in the water management sector, the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) has adapted into Irish law the guidelines for the purchase of chemicals used for the treatment of water intended for human consumption which have been prepared by the European Committee of Standardisation (CEN). In addition NSAI now offers a standard – ISO 24512. This standard recommends that the management and operators of publicly and privately-owned drinking water utilities establish operations that enhance all legal requirements and give consideration to recognised best practices. Adoption of ISO 24512 by drinking water utilities together with the NSAI certification of the water treatment chemicals supplied by Chemifloc would guarantee compliance with EU standards. These measures would contribute to safeguarding the provision of potable water to dependent communities and restore confidence in this, the most basic of human needs.

Teamwork and Hard Work the Winning Formula in Tidy Towns

All over the country local communities have been playing an active role in improving the visual presentation of their towns and villages as a very practical means of generating local pride in the community and improving quality of life in their area. What are the ingredients that go into this mobilisation of local volunteers for the benefit of the wider community? The example of Louth, which has scored recent successes in the national Tidy Towns competition and – through Dundalk – in the EU-wide Entente Florale competition, shows that it is often down to a combination of teamwork and hard work in the border county.

Louth retained all of its gold medals in the national Tidy Towns competition – meaning it remains the only county with four top-rated locations as Drogheda, Dundalk, Knockbridge and Tallanstown held on to gold in the keenly-contested awards organised by the Tidy Towns Unit at the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government and sponsored by SuperValu.

In Tallanstown's case, the village came within a single point of overall national success – scoring 304 points compared to 305 for Emly, Co Tipperary which secured their first win in the competition's 51-year history.

As well as finishing joint second with Westport, Co Mayo and Ennis, Co Clare in the overall national competition, Tallanstown also won a further two special competitions – the Tidy Towns Best Bring Bank Award and the Tidy Towns "Can It!" Award. The Tidy Towns Best Bring Bank Award is sponsored by Repak to recognise community support in maintaining local bring banks and assisting with their general appearance and use. The Tidy Towns "Can It!" Award is a special art competition sponsored by the European Aluminium Association (EAA) to find the most novel artistic design made from used beverage cans and foils.

Louth's other three gold medallists also scored well – Knockbridge registering 300 marks (just five less than Emly); Dundalk 297 and Drogheda 294.

Conn Murray, Louth County Manager, said: "The sustained achievements by Drogheda, Dundalk, Knockbridge and Tallanstown in Tidy Towns are tremendous and it was great to see them acknowledged once again on the national stage. While resources are obviously an issue in the current funding climate, Louth Local Authorities remain committed to supporting the good work being done on the ground here as we recognise the value of proper presentation and how it feeds into people's sense of their own place.

"This type of success can only be achieved through teamwork where communities combine with the local authorities in a sustained effort to present their area in the best possible light. The Council's outdoor personnel do excellent work across Louth but they can only succeed if there's a genuine partnership with local people who are in the areas day in and day out. The communities who tend to

succeed at Tidy Towns are generally also proactive across other areas as they've got that great community spirit that makes good things happen," Mr Murray continued.

"There's a lot of truth in the saying 'many hands make light work' and that is certainly the case when it comes to presenting locations in the best possible light. We all benefit when our towns and villages are showcased properly and the volunteers in each community are the real heroes of Tidy Towns.

"More generally, a willingness to work with others to achieve shared ambitions is something that is very apparent in Louth. We also see this in the Louth Economic Forum chaired by former IDA Ireland chief executive, Padraic White. This group brings together a range of agencies across sectors to advance the county's economic development agenda."

The gateway to the northeast, Dundalk was also celebrating again recently having won a silver award in the Europe-wide Entente Florale competition.

Mary Murtagh, Senior Executive Officer in Louth County Council's environment section, said: "A judging panel evaluated Dundalk in July and the silver medal success is further evidence of the great strides the town has made over the past few years. The Entente Florale silver award is the latest success for Dundalk which was Ireland's cleanest town in the Irish Business Against Litter (IBAL) survey last year and continues to hold one of Louth's four Tidy Towns gold medals.

"A comprehensive floral scheme for the town was put in place this summer with Dundalk Town Council, businesses and residents all rowing in behind a coordinated effort which saw

the town in full bloom for the judges' visit."

The adjudicators' comments for Dundalk noted: "The town benefits from an unspoilt natural environment and dramatic scenery. Dundalk is blooming due to the efforts of 'Team Dundalk' – an alliance of Council staff, Tidy Towns committee, the business community and residents."

Reacting to the Tidy Towns and Entente Florale recognition, Alison Condra, Tourism Officer, Louth County Council, said how Dundalk and the rest of Louth is presented is of tremendous importance when promoting the county to business and leisure visitors.

"Both domestic and overseas visitors place a lot of emphasis on the environment when they are considering a destination. If an area looks well-presented then it suggests a strong pride of place and this will tend to also come across when visitors go to local hotels, bars and restaurants where they can expect excellent service and a warm welcome.

Similarly, if an area has a shabby or uncared for appearance then visitors will be put off coming or staying.

"While our location midway between Dublin and Belfast can sometimes mean we're overlooked, Louth has a lot to offer visitors with historic urban centres, monastic settlements and unspoilt mountains and coast. Activities are also a growing part of our tourism offering and Carlingford is a real hub for outdoor pursuits with Ravensdale offering equestrian facilities and the Cooley Peninsula having some of the country's best hiking routes.

"Our location and excellent road access also makes Louth very attractive for conference business, especially where there is an all-island dimension and delegates are travelling from Northern Ireland as well as the Republic. This is a seam of business that we will continue to push forward as our proximity to the major urban centres and Dublin Airport as well as the availability of delegate accommodation and facilities make this a very business-friendly location."



Dundalk Courthouse – Dundalk has had recent success in both the Tidy Towns and Entente Florale Competitions.

Limerick Local Government Committee

The Limerick Local Government Committee was established by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley TD, on 18 February under the chairmanship of Denis Brosnan, to advise him on the most appropriate solution for more effective local government arrangements for the Limerick area. The Minister for the Environment stated at the launch that “a more appropriate system of governance needs to be put in place in Limerick if the city and region are to perform as a strong centre as envisaged in the National Spatial Strategy. Greater local government coherence will also assist the major regeneration efforts which are currently underway.”

The Committee, established under local government legislation, has been asked to prepare a report into the most appropriate arrangements for local government for the city and county of Limerick. It will examine various options, including boundary changes, the creation of a unified city and county authority, and alternative arrangements to share and/or coordinate functions, administration and leadership between the city and county authorities. The Committee is being established in the context of Government consideration of the White Paper on Local Government.

The members of the Limerick Local Government Committee are:

- Denis Brosnan (chair) – founder of Kerry Group, former Chairman of Horseracing Ireland and Chair of the Midwest Task Force
- Maurice Carr – Partner, BDO Simpson Xavier
- John Cullen – former Director General of the Institute of Public Administration

- Brendan Tuohy – former Secretary General of the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources
- Michelle Wilson – Town Planner, Director of Tiros Resources.

Under the terms of reference for the Committee, “in accordance with section 32 of the Local Government Act 1991, the Committee is hereby tasked with preparing a report into the most appropriate arrangements for local government for the city and county of Limerick. The report shall comprehend the leadership and the development of Limerick as a Gateway under the National Spatial Strategy and shall, in particular, include recommendations for improved arrangements including inter alia:

- Whether there should be changes made to the boundary of Limerick City, having examined the City Council’s 2005 application for a boundary extension;
- Whether the County Council of Limerick and the City Council of Limerick should be unified;
- Whether alternative arrangements should be made to share/co-ordinate the functions, administration and leadership of Limerick City and County, either at county/city level or on a wider and more regional basis;
- Whether there should be an adjustment between the boundary of County Clare and Limerick City or County.

The terms of reference state that in carrying out its task the Committee shall have regard to:

- The need to ensure that Limerick city maximises its potential under the National Spatial Strategy, as a

dynamic regional centre in the Midwest, recognising the importance of cities in driving regional development;

- Meeting the challenges in regenerating the city and the wider Midwest region in economic, social and physical terms, taking account of the work of the Task Force on the Midwest established by the Tánaiste and chaired by Mr Denis Brosnan;
- The need to secure value for money in local government, taking account of the work of the Local Government Efficiency Review Group. In this regard the committee will seek data on (i) staffing changes which have occurred in Limerick City and County Councils since the 2008 boundary alteration, (ii) likely staff changes which would occur within both councils in the event of a boundary alteration, (iii) other data on staffing, usage of buildings, and other cost-related issues that the committee deem it necessary to obtain from the councils;
- The fact that 44 per cent of homes in the city council area are social housing, the need to achieve a better level of social diversity in housing across the entire urban area, and the political structure likely to deliver an improved housing mix;
- The need to ensure the delivery of an integrated public service, as set out in the Report of the Task Force on the Public Service;
- The need to ensure that the Limerick region is served by efficient and viable local government structures;
- The recommendation in the Report of the Task Force on the Public Service for the adoption of “county boundaries (or groupings of them) for the organisation, delivery and evaluation of services and programmes”;

Source: Department of the Environment

- Traditional public loyalties to existing local government boundaries, where relevant;
- The possibility that new directly elected political leadership models will be introduced to deliver on innovative local government leadership in Limerick, having regard to the model recently agreed by Government for Dublin and noting also the commitment in the Renewed Programme for Government which proposes to strengthen the strategic role and function of regional authorities in planning transport, water and waste management;
- The recommendations of recent relevant reports and studies including: the National Competitiveness Council report – Our Cities: Drivers of National Competitiveness (April 2009); Gateway Development Index – Border, Midland & Western and Southern & Eastern Regional Assemblies (2009); Addressing issues of Social Disadvantage in Moyross and other disadvantaged areas of Limerick City – Report to the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion (April 2007) – John Fitzgerald; Gateway Investment Priorities – DEHLG and Forfás (2006), Atlantic Gateways – DEHLG (2004).

The Committee shall make such recommendations with respect to the above issues as it considers necessary in the interests of effective, efficient and innovative local government. The Committee will conduct a public consultation process to ensure that all stakeholders have an opportunity to express their views and perspectives to the Committee. It shall prepare and furnish to the Minister a report in writing of its review and its recommendations, which the Minister will publish. Under the terms of reference the Committee shall stand dissolved upon submission of their final report to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

Local Government Efficiency Review Group

The Efficiency Review is one element in gearing local government to continue their important contribution to social, economic and environmental development at local and national level. The Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley TD, established a Local Government Efficiency Review Group on 23 December 2009, to review the cost base, expenditure of and numbers employed in local authorities with a view to reporting by mid-year on:

- specific recommendations to reduce costs;
- the effectiveness of particular programmes;
- optimal efficiency in the way programmes are delivered; and,
- any other proposals to enhance value for money in the delivery of services at local level.

The Group will take account of Government policy on local government organisation, reform and finances, the public service context set by the Task Force on the Public Service and associated Government Statement, necessary legal compliance by local authorities particularly in respect of environmental requirements, public health, and health and safety; and have regard to the state of the public finances. The Minister stated at the launch that “the forthcoming White Paper on Local Government will, among other things, set out Government policy on the structure of local government

in Ireland, including new or enhanced gateway and regional structures”.

He continued that “as part of the Review, there will be a comprehensive consultation process involving the key stakeholders, including Government Departments/Agencies which interact with local authorities, local authorities at both elected and official levels, business groups, and the general public. I will shortly put in place the necessary arrangements for these groups and the public to contribute to this process.” Written submissions were furnished to the Review Group from interested organisations and members of the public prior to the beginning of March 2010. The Group will complete its work by mid-2010 and report to the Minister. The Group will be supported by a secretariat in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

The members of the Local Government Efficiency Review Group are:

Chairperson

Pat McLoughlin, health sector business consultant. Until early 2006 Mr McLoughlin served as the Deputy Chief Executive of the Health Service Executive and National Director (Hospitals). He is currently CEO of the Irish Payment Services Organisation. He recently served on the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes.

Membership

- Geraldine Tallon, Secretary General, Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government
- Donal McNally, Second Secretary General, Department of Finance
- Professor John O'Hagan, Department of Economics, Trinity College Dublin
- John Quinlivan, Former County Manager
- Ian Talbot, Chief Executive, Chambers Ireland

Source: Department of the Environment

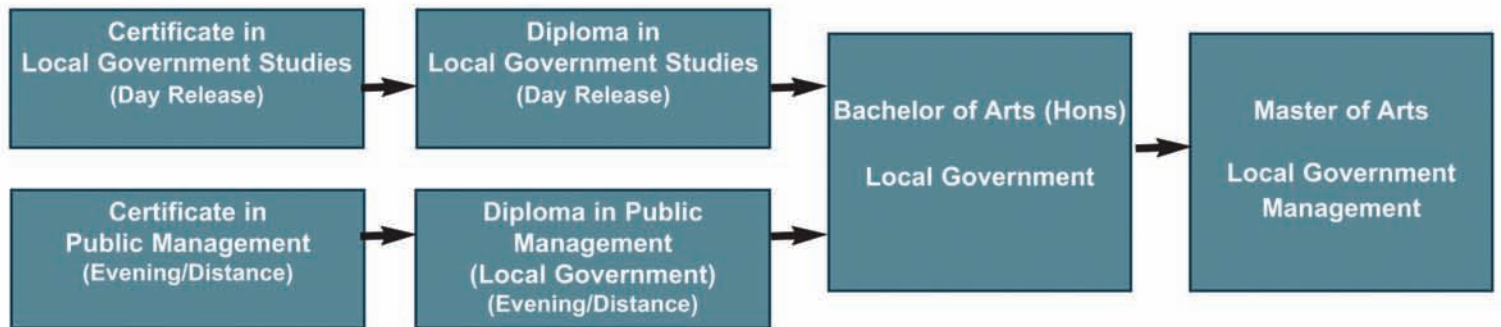


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Introduction of VAT on Local Authority Services – Higher Charges for the Public?

The Government introduced VAT on a range of local authority services, including waste collection, recycling, off-street parking, toll roads and the operation of leisure facilities, in the Finance Bill at the beginning of February 2010. From 1 July 2010, these local authority services will attract a VAT rate of 13.5 per cent or 21 per cent, depending on whether the equivalent private sources attract VAT at the lower or standard rate. Education, health, water and passenger transport services will not become subject to VAT as they are otherwise exempted from VAT. Purely regulatory functions such as parking fines, fees for passports and driving licences, development levies, casual trading licences and certificates of compliance will also remain exempted from VAT.

The Revenue Commissioners have written to all local authorities seeking lists of all goods and services they provide to the public or to businesses at a cost, so they can be assessed for VAT at either 13.5 or 21 per cent. The

VAT change arises from a ruling in July 2009 in the European Court of Justice (ECJ) which found that Ireland was transgressing an EU directive by exempting public bodies, including local authorities, from applying VAT. The ECJ ruling requires local authorities and public bodies to impose VAT on a range of services to avoid distorting the market between private and public operators. This is because private companies competing against local authorities by providing bin collections and other services are forced to charge VAT.

Dublin City Council in January highlighted that the imposition of VAT on services provided by local authorities will result in a higher cost to the customer for the service. For example, the biggest charge householders will face is likely to be the imposition of VAT on council bin collections. In Dublin city the current maximum annual bin charge most householders would face is €304. If VAT were applied at 21 per cent this would increase to €367.84. For poorer

households in receipt of waivers, who will be paying bin collection fees in Dublin city for the first time this year, their maximum bill would rise from €208 to €251.68. Similar charges are faced by householders in all parts of the State who use local authority services for their waste collection. However, those already using private waste operators would see no increase as VAT is already applied to their bills. Many county councils in the State have for quite some time ceased providing bin collections and have instead contracted out the work to private operators.

The Department of Finance stated that the impact on people who availed of local authority services would “depend on whether the VAT is passed on by the public bodies”. It also noted that if authorities chose to pass on the VAT the impact would be “limited” as the public bodies would also now have an entitlement to deduct VAT on their inputs – the costs they incur in providing services to the public and to business.

Sources: European legislation summaries (http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/taxation) the Irish Times and The Irish Independent.

We are always interested in your views, so if you have any comments, suggestions or ideas for topics that we should address in future issues, please do not hesitate to let us know. *Local Authority Times* is also published on the IPA website: www.ipa.ie

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