

# Civic engagement, metropolitan governance and political identity in Ireland

Summary findings from an IRC funded project  
*Ireland in the Metropolitan Century, 2019-2021*

Niamh Moore-Cherry (PI), John Tomaney (Co-I) & Carla Maria Kayanan



In Ireland there has been no identifiable urban agenda and a general and deeply rooted reluctance to engage with the metropolitan as a distinct territorial scale across institutions and scales of government.

The National Planning Framework (2018), Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES) and Metropolitan Area Spatial Plans (MASP) demonstrate that legislation has been shifting to address this.

Does Ireland have the capacity to deliver on these new spatial arrangements?

Across the globe, similar spatial arrangements have demonstrated that the quality of “civic capital” is key to effective metropolitan governance. Civic capacity is the ability for a variety of institutions and stakeholders to come together and operate as one collective ‘actor’ to have a greater impact in shaping policies that reflect the interests of the scale in which they operate. Our particular interest is in the way civic capacity is formed within a metropolitan context. In this project we examined the barriers and enablers in developing a metropolitan agenda and civic capacity in a country with a traditional rural identity and reluctance to engage at this scale.

Below we highlight four critical elements necessary for effective metropolitan civic capacity and how they are challenged in the Irish context. We use quotes to demonstrate each point. The quotes come from a variety of sources: interviews with stakeholders at the local, regional and central scale; a survey conducted on Ireland’s local councillors; content analysis of all the steps involved in drafting and finalising the NPF, RSES and MASPs documents to include preliminary drafts as well as public responses to each draft iteration and revised versions; minutes of regional assembly meetings; and Dáil debates where spatial plans were debated.

### History/ Culture of Civic Capacity

In Ireland, there is no evidence of thinking historically about an urban agenda never mind a metropolitan identity for the city-regions.

*“...maybe it's less about the infrastructure and the organic growth, but changing the broader mindset and the psyche.” (local authority planner)*

Operationally the metropolitan is not a recognised scale by infrastructure providers or other key agencies. Some desire is evident among professional planners at the local authority level to ‘activate’ this scale and to use legislation to shape/renew senior management thinking.

*“It makes buy-in easier for me corporately when I'm talking to my senior management team. We're saying this is a good thing. And the government thinks it's a good thing because they have it in this circular. And that's all it is, but it just helps create buy-in and it helps people realize this is something that's going to happen.” (local authority planner)*

## Temporality

Temporality implies the need to bring different stakeholders in at the right time. A phased / layered approach is required. First, a common language to begin changing the broader mindset and psyche. Then, collective sharing, updating and trust building to enable something much bigger and get buy-in. In Ireland, there exists a perception that opportunities for buy-in were lost in initial stages of MASP development.

*"...like what is a MASP? We haven't done that before. What's that actually going to mean? We worked on without it, but it would have been useful for us to have it, or to be flagging it for our members so that when it comes round or the next time round. Now that it's adopted, they have to buy in to it. Whereas there was probably an opportunity for us to be getting them familiar with the language of it had we been aware of it in advance of it becoming a statutory instrument." (local authority planner)*

Temporality also implies that change is not going to happen instantly and will be incremental. It is an evolution that requires slightly longer timeframes than perhaps some would want.

*"I don't think people realize the time that can be spent chatting to people and making them aware. And actually it's well worth the time because when people understand they generally buy into it." (local authority planner)*

Finally, there are likely to be winners and losers in the short term, but overall goals will be a win-win for everyone in the longer term.

*"...there is only a limited pot, but long-term this is the big, long, moving ship; it's going to take time to get there, so you kind of have to buy into the process and you have to give it time." (regional official)*

## Enablers of Capacity Building

Once building comfort with the idea, there are a set of enablers that are necessary. The right amount of ambition, confidence in a process that will create a positive feedback loop and generate more civic capacity at the appropriate scale rather than fear of the plans, collegiality to develop a common purpose and vision and there is an emerging sense of this among the professional players and personality as civic capacity is a function of the personalities involved.

*"...it's one thing creating these documents and the wonderful ideas, it's another implementing them and the view on the ground from local representatives and local people is that, 'Well, these documents are dictating to us.' That's it. So therefore they are bad." (local authority planner)*

*"In the implementation group for our MASPs there is a definite collegiality about how everybody wants to get on with the job. Everybody understands why we're doing it. Everybody believes in the vision. ...If you went back 15 years ago, you would've had a very different set of people in that room. Not all of them would have agreed with even the concept of what we were trying to do." (local councillor)*

## Governance Structures

There is a need for a more agonistic and robust approach that recognizes disagreement and tries to work through, rather than shutting down, the politics.

Governance or “capacity” at this scale in Ireland is consistently conflated with accountability and box-ticking rather than shifting the psyche and operational structures of key players

*“There was just too much conflict and everybody wanted something different. And then instead of it sort of working through the conflict and the suggestions and coming to an end point we'd come back to a second workshop only to be told, 'Ah, the government's taken over this issue now, you know, it's no longer for you anymore. We've got this new guideline or this new document, and that matter's gone from the agenda.’” (local authority planner)*

## Summary

Although there exists a general recognition in the literature and policy that metropolitan scale is key to economic development, Ireland is an anomaly. Recent attempts at policy and plan level to move beyond metro-phobia require significant levels of metropolitan civic capacity. The limited culture of metropolitan civic capacity in Ireland means that it is likely to emerge incrementally if phased properly through a set of enablers including achievable ambition, confidence and trust building. Even with these enablers, the appropriate governance structures must be put in place and a shift to a more agonistic approach to capacity building is needed to develop the metropolitan as a recognisable and meaningful scale in the Irish context.

To receive a copy of the full report visit: <https://forms.gle/FMThCVZU5TJfuB8P9>