



Draft People Strategy 2026 - 2031

Introduction

Fórsa welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Draft People Strategy Document 2026 – 2031.

Fórsa represents more than 12,000 workers in Local Government and Local Services, including clerical, administrative, management, technical and professional staff, as well as general operatives and supervisory grades across the greater Dublin area.

Preamble

10,000 council jobs were lost following the financial crisis. Services were only maintained because staff undertook additional duties above their pay grades. In the public sector, local authorities suffered the greatest reduction of numbers of employees during the austerity era, which has resulted in significant grade drift in the sector.

Austerity, privatisation, executive direction, and centralisation have hollowed out our public services and stripped local authorities and local communities of their democratic power. Ireland now has the worst level of local representation and the weakest local government of any country in Europe. Today, our local government is actively being degraded. Essential public services like housing, water, energy, and waste are being undermined and trust in our system of Government is being eroded day by day.

Fórsa has been calling for a reform of local government which would enhance the provision of services to communities across Ireland, while also strengthening democracy. Ultimately, this would entail an enhanced role of local government in effective service provision; in decision-making; and in rebuilding public confidence in democracy.

The document provides Fórsa's analysis of the Local Government People Strategy (2026–2031), highlighting both positive themes and significant concerns from a trade union perspective. It critiques the strategy's omissions, ambiguities, and potential risks to workers, emphasising the need for more employee-centred approaches and concrete commitments.

Staffing

The full-time equivalent (FTE) staff complement for local authorities in Q4 of 2008 was 35,007.53¹. In Q4 of 2024 that had dropped to 32,372.40². During this period Ireland recorded a population increase of 957,000 from 4,422,100 in August 2008³ to 5,380,000 in April 2024⁴. This means there has been a reduction of 7.5% in FTE staff working in local authorities at a time when there was a 21% increase in the population.

¹ https://databank.per.gov.ie/Public_Service_Numbers.aspx?rep=LA

² https://databank.per.gov.ie/Public_Service_Numbers.aspx?rep=LA

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https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2008/popmig_2008.pdf

⁴ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-yin/ireland2024theyearinnumbers/>

While it is important to note that staffing levels have increased from a low of 26,630.36 FTE in 2015, the staffing numbers are still far below what should be expected in local authorities.

There is a significant burden being placed on staff who often feel overworked and overburdened. In 2023 88.7% of staff in local authorities indicated that the issue of staff shortages was important or very important to them. 48.1% of respondents were concerned that they would burnout and 32.8% felt that their workload was unsustainable.

The reduction in staffing numbers has led to a significant number of people undertaking work of a grade above them. In the Fórsa survey, 80% of respondents stated that they would apply for a job evaluation scheme if one was available.

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- **Staffing:** Local authorities need to significantly increase the FTE staff complement to ensure consistent and sustainable delivery of services to local communities across Ireland.
- **Mentoring opportunities:** The strategy opens avenues for mentoring, which could benefit both new and existing members through workplace improvements and union support for mentor training. We want to agree the process for mentoring, and adding value to staff to retain and attract workers.
- **AI:** The sector must negotiate an appropriate AI policy through the Local Authority National Council National Council (LANC) in order to protect public services and workers. This includes the delivery of services, enabling tools to support staff and issues pertaining to recruitment processes.
- **Job Evaluation:** We welcome the progress on job evaluation to date; however, we will be seeking to quicken the pace and rollout of job evaluation across the sector after the learning outcomes have been agreed in the three pilot sites. The union fundamentally believes that access to the job evaluation scheme is a central component in the recruitment and retention challenges.
- **Blended Working:** The commentary prioritises blended working policies simply predicated on business needs, performance management, and productivity without commitments to protect existing and recently renegotiated arrangements. Fórsa can evidence that thousands of workers identify blended working arrangements as a central reason for continuing to work in the sector. Blended working can help underpin the sector's stated aim to be the employer of choice, and also to commit retention and recruitment strategy and the offering of more inclusion and diversity strategies. Recently, we are witnessing the rolling back on entitlements to blending working, including the number of days on offer in some local authorities. Employers should be under no illusion that this will create unnecessary friction with workers and inevitably lead to industrial strife.
- **Four-day working week:** The unions wish to agree pilots on the four-day working week across the sector. A shorter working week can bring benefits to everyone. For workers it means more time to themselves. For employers it can bring greater productivity, as well as attracting the best talent. For careers, a shorter working week can allow greater

flexibility, supporting participation in the workforce. On a societal level, a four-day week also supports workers to take better care of their health and can have a positive impact on the environment by reducing carbon created by commuting, for example. The decision of South Cambs. District Council to pilot the four-day working week has been an overwhelming success, so much so, the Council has formalised the agreement for all staff to a reduced four-day week without the loss of pay, leading to significant increases of recruitment and retention, performance and health outcomes for staff. The four-day week is better for everyone and would greatly assist with the sector to become the employer of choice and underpin a commitment to retain and attract staff.

- **Increased performance monitoring risks:** The strategy's focus on performance management redesign and data-driven monitoring may lead to increased surveillance and managerial discretion without clear protections, appeals processes, or collective bargaining safeguards. This is something that the union requires more details on.
- **Health and Safety:** Many Fórsa members with public facing roles are reporting a sharp increase in harassment and intimidation as per the employee satisfaction survey of Fórsa members working across local authorities. We are calling for a joint union/management working group to tackle this prevailing problem.
- **Workforce agility concerns:** Emphasis on workforce agility and mobility could justify role drift, erosion of specialist roles, and restructuring without proper consultation. This would be completely unacceptable to Fórsa.
- **Transfer Policy:** There should be a transfer policy across local authorities, both internal and in between local authorities. This will assist with recruitment and retention and further support staff with commuting, as well as aid employers to be more family friendly.
- **Overtime:** The union welcomes agreement on the change of the overtime divisor to reflect the removal of the “Croke Park Hours”. However, as already raised at the LANC, we are seeking the removal of the free hour’s overtime. The current expectation demanded by the sector that workers in those grades work for free is neither fair, reasonable nor sustainable. We are seeking equity with other comparators in the public sector. Failure to resolve this issue will result in a dispute.
- **Recruitment standardisation risks centralisation:** Standardising recruitment templates and processes may reduce local autonomy, transparency, and slow recruitment, with potential weakening of local industrial relations and probation discretion. Fórsa will be insisting on the maintenance and expansion of the confined competition processes as previously negotiated. “Standardised 100-day induction programmes” must create space for the inclusion of trade unions to promote membership and union structures and involvement. Recruitment panels must be refreshed and made more reflective of societal demographics and structural changes across the sector and our society. Recruitment panels must be compulsorily trained to agreed minimum standards, including Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).
- **Upskilling:** The sector should agree with unions an ongoing voluntary skills audit for workers to improve their chances for personal development and career progression. This can include further education, personal development and career pathways. Local authorities need to offer workers the opportunity for upskilling, support and incentivising key areas; for example, that 20% of recruits to the public sector will be competent in the Irish language by the end of 2030.

- **Resource gaps threaten delivery:** The strategy lacks funding commitments for additional HR staff, training, ICT upgrades, and wellbeing initiatives, risking work intensification and making commitments aspirational without dedicated resources.
- **Grievance and disciplinary:** We welcome the agreement to negotiate with the unions a new sector wide grievance and disciplinary policy. This will also need to include dignity at work. All of these matters must be reflected in the People Strategy.
- **EDI and wellbeing positive:** While supportive of equality, diversity, inclusion, and wellbeing, the strategy fails to identify funding for reasonable accommodations, protections for staff with long-term illness, long covid, workload management, and resourcing for EDI training. We wish to see a roadmap for EDI, including strategies to drive up recruitment and retention of disabled workers – including meeting the 6% minimum statutory employment target for disabled people as part of Government National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025 – 2030. We have also tabled a claim for specific policy on Neurodiversity across the sector that should be reflected in the strategy.
- **Outsourcing:** An end to the trend of outsourcing in local authorities. The provision of local services is a critical function of local authorities. Unfortunately, some local authorities in Ireland consistently seek to outsource a broad range of services. This often occurs without consultation⁵ with unions⁶, contrary to the provisions of successful national agreements, which has led to frequent industrial disputes between unions and councils as employers. The drive to outsource services occurs in an environment in which successive public sector national agreements have made firm and clear commitments to use direct labour “where consistent with efficient and effective public service delivery.”
- **Energy and climate:** Support local authorities to lead micro-generation and community ownership of renewable energy projects. Experience shows that State-based investment is central to realising new forms of renewable energy and, in many countries, processes of local democratic participation recognise the degree to which innovation needs to be vested in local authorities to generate community buy-in, engagement and ownership in transition processes. In addition, local authorities have a key role in promoting and implementing energy efficiency measures. The sector needs more dedicated staff in order to assist local authorities and communities to make the necessary transition in order to be more environmentally sustainable and to help Ireland.

Conclusion

Fórsa engaged in this draft consultation process in good faith, which must be reciprocated by the sector with commitment and collaboration. For it to be meaningful, it needs to be more than a box-ticking exercise. All of the areas identified require dedicated and ringfenced resources – both financial and staffing.

Fórsa is requesting that the thirty-one City and County Councils engage employees in an annual confidential staff satisfaction survey. The survey should be agreed with unions in advance.

⁵ <https://forsatradeunion.newsweaver.com/designtest/iq6pu5aws7j>

⁶ <https://forsatradeunion.newsweaver.com/designtest/11dwsne26u8>

As part of the finalisation of the People Strategy, we believe that an Independent Equality Impact Assessment should be undertaken and IHREC invited to offer an assessment and recommendations.

Fórsa is formally requesting that unions are consulted on any revised plans for consideration before this strategy document is finalised. Fórsa reserves the right to advance or challenge all decisions that we believe are detrimental to the employment and overall terms and conditions of our members. Where appropriate, we exhaust all mechanisms at our disposal to protect members before and during the lifetime of the People Strategy 2026-2031.

As ever, Fórsa remains available for meaningful and solution focussed negotiations.

18th March 2026.