

Consultation: Developing a Programme for Local Government 2016 – 2020

NILGA are inviting councils to respond to the questions outlined in this consultation, and to provide any other comments that they wish to add by 31st December 2015 to Claire Bradley at the NILGA offices (c.bradley@nilga.org). A summary of the questions are provided on the final page.

Introduction

With the reform of local government, the impending review of the NI Assembly, looming Assembly elections and the forthcoming publication of the Programme for Government for NI, local authorities in Northern Ireland have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to work collectively as a sector to improve the governance, economy and quality of public services for our citizens.

The forthcoming NI Executive's Programme for Government (PfG) will set out the plans and priorities for Northern Ireland as a region for the next Assembly mandate. Notwithstanding the current political uncertainty and the potential to return to direct rule, no incoming Executive should ignore the significant role that councils and local communities can play in the future successes of Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is a distinct possibility that councils may be the only locally elected political forums available for decision-making in Northern Ireland, should the Assembly be suspended.

NILGA, in conjunction with the 11 new councils, and following discussions at the last Partnership Panel meeting, has agreed to develop a Programme for Local Government 2016 – 2020, setting out why and how the two spheres of government can and should work together, with shared goals and a collective purpose - whilst ensuring that councils quite clearly retain their independence.

Developing a contemporary local government for Northern Ireland

The services and powers provided by councils have now been augmented by council-led community planning, development planning and management, enhanced economic development responsibilities, the power of general competence and soon, by regeneration/ enhanced community development responsibilities. These welcome and vital strategic additions will transform councils' ability to improve the lives and experience of their local people, businesses and visitors to their areas, and the quality of the areas as a whole.

NILGA views the recent reforms as just the first phase in the development of a stronger, modern local government in Northern Ireland.

The public expects efficiency at all times and is keen for a 'citizen led' normalisation of government structures and service provision, to suit the requirements of local people,

communities and economies. For this to happen, NILGA asserts that there must be more devolution of powers and resources to councils to enable them to better deliver for local people.

It is clearly understood that cost benefit analyses will be a necessary part of any redesign, as will taking an outcomes-based approach which fully considers the involvement of local communities and the impact of services across Northern Ireland.

For ease of reference, NILGA has listed a suite of services, considered to be the completion of the **first phase** of local government's contemporary development in Northern Ireland (i.e. post 1st April 2015).

Powers, Functions and Duties

Pre 2015		2015 Reform Gains
Leisure and recreation	Waste Management	General Power of Competence
Parks and open spaces	Economic Development	Partnership Panel
Food Safety & Standards	Tourism development	Community Planning
Pollution control	Community Relations	Planning
Building control	Emergency Planning	Economic development +
Welfare of animals	Museums & Art Galleries	Off street car parking
Dog control	Street naming & cleansing	Performance Improvement
Community centres	Consumer safety	Museums & Art Galleries +
Rural Development Partnerships	Policing & Community Safety Partnerships	2016 – Reform continues...
Licensing	Markets and Fairs	
Public Conveniences	Culture and Arts	Urban and Rural Regeneration
Burial grounds & crematoria		Community development +
		Advice services + (Key: + enhanced powers)
Representative Role		
Education and Library Boards (to 2015)		Education Authority(post-2015)
Local HSC Commissioning Groups		
Housing Council		
Consultative Role		
Health and Social Care Trusts		
Transport NI		
Power NI, NI Water and other utilities		
Post Office		

NILGA recommends that strategic discussion should take place within the sector in relation to the strengthening of contemporary local government.

Such discussion should include the consideration of potential enhanced responsibilities as follows:

- *European Programmes*
- *Local roads and transport including planning of local bus and ferry services*
- *Maintenance of the public realm*
- *Economic development including co-ordinating skills development*
- *Housing and the built environment*
- *Libraries, arts, culture and sport*
- *Community relations*
- *Environmental services, including conservation of natural and built heritage*
- *Fishery harbours*
- *Other services carried out in partnership with or on behalf of departments and other bodies e.g. certain health promotion and protection functions.*

Devolution of powers and functions such as these to councils is happening in neighbouring jurisdictions and across Europe. Is this something we should be exploring?

NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to the list of suggested 'potential enhanced responsibilities' outlined above. Are there any other functions that we should consider discussing? Are there any of the functions listed above that you feel are not suitable to be devolved to local councils?

Specific Asks 2016 – 2020

Furthermore, NILGA offers, for councils' consideration, a number of more 'specific asks' – issues that we would press the NI Executive to include in its next Programme for Government. NILGA asserts that these 'asks' are prerequisites for councils to deliver solutions for government.

1. A **power to enable** effective **pooling of budgets** by departments, public bodies and councils to facilitate the implementation of community plans and the achievement of agreed outcomes by March 2017.
2. To monitor the progress of the impending review of the NI **Code of Conduct** for Councillors.
3. A new **Civil Contingencies Bill**, recognising the local co-ordination role of councils in emergency planning activity; and ring-fencing funding for emergency planning and climate adaptation measures by January 2017.
4. Commitment from DFP to work with Treasury to **return 'ring fenced' Landfill Tax revenue directly to Northern Ireland councils** for investment in waste management infrastructure by December 2016.

In England, councils approach the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to request a share of the revenue raised, with the Treasury deciding whether money should go back into local authority budgets.

5. To devolve powers and funding for **skills and employment support** to councils, by March 2017, albeit regionally policy co-ordinated, in partnership with higher education colleges, to accompany the devolution of local economic development and regeneration, so that investment decisions can be based directly on what local economies and local businesses need in terms of future and present workforces to create jobs.
6. To give councils in Northern Ireland the same **traffic management powers** similar to Wales and other regions, by December 2016, in order to reduce the costs, emissions and disruption from congestion and to assist in covering the costs of air quality monitoring requirements.
7. To include an elected member from each council on the Board of the new **Education Authority by November 2016**. (To be cross-referenced with 'specific ask' 5).
8. To develop an agreed, **shared**, cross-governmental, outcome-focused **performance management and improvement** system by September 2017 – so can we can improve together.
9. To develop a new **Northern Ireland European Regional Forum**, by March 2016, led by OFMDFM on behalf of regional government, and co-ordinated through NILGA within local government, to optimise knowledge and investment of Structural and Non-Structural Funds available through the EU.
10. To develop, by December 2016, more effective governance structures at regional, national and Brussels levels to **influence EU Policy and Investment Priorities** between now and 2020 – in order to develop a locally driven approach in this area of policy.

NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to the list of suggested '10 specific asks' outlined above. Is there anything else that should be included? Are there any 'asks' listed above that should not be included?

Delivering Better

Improving, innovative, high quality public services must be an aim of both spheres of government in Northern Ireland, as well as to ensure that duplication and over-administration are eliminated. It is likely that we will soon face alterations to the Barnett Formula, which will require all of NI government to work in a more joined-up way with fewer grants and a smaller national subsidy.

So, we are all expected to do more, better, with less. Longer term financial planning is vital.

Councils shouldn't be expected to provide services on the basis of annual grants or rates forecasting, without all the required data and related facts from departments.

NILGA is seeking a commitment from **all NI Executive departments to engage** with councils prior to making financial decisions that have an impact on community planning and related council budgets, within a time frame that acknowledges your fiscal budgeting and rate-setting timetable. *This needs to be more than a paper consultation exercise.*

NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to NILGA seeking a commitment from all NI Executive departments to engage with councils, prior to making financial decisions that will have an impact on local councils.

Guiding Principles

Enabling partnership through agreed principles and resources makes for better delivery. NILGA would assert that the following guiding principles are fundamental to the effectiveness of central – local government partnership working and to the Programmes for Government and Local Government.



NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to the proposed 'Guiding Principles' outlined above. Are they acceptable and should any be added or taken away?

An outcomes-based approach

NILGA asserts that we need a Programme for Government that fully recognises the roles of councils. There are many examples of how the work of councils contributes to achieving government outcomes, and which would be more effective if there was more integration of central-local efforts.

It is necessary to have a Programme for Government that commits departments to engage fully in the council-led community planning process, including the pooling of resources to have specific, single, easily measured outcomes.

NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to NILGA lobbying the NI Executive to ensure that the next Programme for Government includes local government as a key partner and that the PfG core targets are outcomes focused.

NILGA would invite councils to respond to the questions outlined above, and to provide any other comments that they wish to add by 31st December 2015 to Claire Bradley at the NILGA offices (c.bradley@nilga.org).

Please contact Derek McCallan (T: 028 9079 8979 E: d.mccallan@nilga.org) if your council would like any further information or a presentation on the proposals contained within this consultation.

Next Steps

Following receipt of responses from local authorities, NILGA intends to develop a framework Programme for Local Government in early 2016 which will be used to:

- **Recast** the relationship between NI assembly and local government, in doing so focusing delivery of co-ordinated local services and a stronger economy.
- **Deliver** a two-tier genuinely integrated government approach to meet local needs through a co-designed council led community planning process, delivered by a regional growth framework around agreed partnership working principles and actions.
- **Grow** stronger and cohesive communities, targeting investment and knowledge where needed most.
- **Allow** for greater control on local spending priorities and to allocate funding as councils (in partnership with communities) see fit, giving them greater fiscal autonomy.

- **Influence** the allocation and the delivery of sub-regional spending, as a formal part of the next Programme for Government in Northern Ireland.
- **Create** new public service partnership opportunities with the NI Executive, private and 'third' sectors, bringing better services to local places across all of Northern Ireland, for the next ten years.

NILGA is committed to supporting councils in this work by representing local government on regionally and nationally significant policy issues, to develop (if appropriate/ possible) consensus positions, facilitating engagement with government on regionally and nationally significant issues through the building of constructive working relationships. In council responses to NILGA's previous consultation on reconstituting NILGA, councils were keen that NILGA should invest time and effort in developing targeted campaigns to maximise outcomes for local government and the citizen. We hope that the development of a Programme for Local Government is testimony to this, which maximises outcomes for local councils and local communities.

Summary of Key Questions

1. Devolution of powers and functions such as these to councils are happening in neighbouring jurisdictions and across Europe. Is this something we should be exploring? NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to the list of suggested 'potential enhanced responsibilities' outlined above. Are there any other functions that we should consider discussing? Are there any of the functions listed above that you feel are not suitable to be devolved?
2. NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to the list of suggested '10 specific asks' outlined in the consultation document. Is there anything else that should be included? Are there any 'asks' listed above that should not be included?
3. NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to NILGA seeking a commitment from all departments to engage with councils; prior to making financial decisions that has an impact on council budgets.
4. NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to the proposed 'Guiding Principles' outlined in the consultation document. Are they acceptable and should any be added or taken away?
5. NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to NILGA lobbying the NI Executive to ensure that the next Programme for Government includes local government as a key partner and that the PfG core targets are outcomes focused.

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