

This bulletin / commentary has been compiled by NILGA, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, in order to provide all Elected Members of all local authorities the opportunity to develop awareness of and assess activity within the Local Government Reform Programme - the working model for the Local Government Re-organisation Bill, as determined by the Department of the Environment (DoE).

Strategic Overview / Actions

The Department of the Environment (DoE) will submit its recommendations to the NI Executive (expected November 2012) following the 77 consultation responses received regarding the Local Government Re-organisation Bill. At NILGA's request, the Department's full responses are published on the DoE's website. NILGA has prepared an Executive Summary with analysis – as presented to its Executive and to Councils on 10th August 2012 - www.nilga.org

WELCOME - the introduction of the Power of General Competence – welcomed as an important tool in strengthening councils' role in delivering for their communities

CAUTION - NILGA does not agree with the proposal to determine certain performance indicators at individual Ministerial level for transferred functions. Councils are independent, wish to develop existing, strong performance measures through collaboration and are not merely delivery agents.

MORE WORK NEEDED – a strategic and properly determined (i.e. with the local government sector) body of work is required to address several mission-critical initiatives, to include:

- The LG Reform timetable and respective roles of Statutory Transition Committees & Shadow Councils;
- Financing Reform: notwithstanding the 3rd September 2012 bid to the NI Executive, the full and long term costs of reform and the sheer gulf existing between the costs accumulating and the lack of capacity of councils to pay for everything MUST be starkly presented;
- Legislated for statutory controls on vacancies (imminent);
- Discussions on investment planning / control (developing);
- Capacity building: resources for capacity building of councillors not mentioned in the DoE response but these are absolutely vital for Planning and, more widely, councillors should be a core part of determining elected member development and determining ethical standards, call in procedures and similar;
- Removing policy gaps which exist in terms of Best Value, Ministerial power of intervention, partnership panels, staff and asset transfers and Localism, to name but a few. Although some will be captured within the Reform Working Group structure (see below), **ALL** will require democratic input and scrutiny by councils.

Regional Transition Committee / Regional Transition Operational Board (RTC / RTOB)

These bodies have each met twice (as at 28th August 2012, with scheduled meetings on 30th August (RTC) and 26th September (RTOB)).

The **RTC** has representation from the 11 Voluntary Transition Committees, usually but not always consisting of a VTC Chair / Co-Chair, together with the NILGA President. The RTC meeting of 25th April 2012 was an introductory session where only the broad Reform Timetable was agreed. It was evident that governance – who decides what and when, and the ratifying / advisory nature of the RTC within the structures – needed clarification. The RTC meeting of 21st June 2012 enabled discussion on local implementation, additional elected member representation on implementation structures and areas of concern. NILGA has consistently and vehemently asserted that councillor representation should increase on the RTC, and that a Political Reference Group should be formed to enable a vastly improved Assembly – Local Government policy debate and Programme for Government shared working should exist. The absence of cross party representation, and updates from VTCs, NILGA and the DoE (the latter on Boundaries and regional issues like the June 2012 bid for finance) were provided amidst pleas for clarity around roles / responsibilities.

The **RTOB** is the officer grouping initially convened on 24th May 2012 with 11 CEOs and the NILGA CEO, together with representation from DoE and transferring Departments. Both of the meetings of the RTOB (second meeting 26th July 2012) essentially registered concerns regarding governance, representation, buy-in, communication, and increased engagement (a senior officer engagement event occurred in Antrim on 4th July 2012). The development of and representation on the nine Working Groups was also discussed and at the second meeting (late July) progress reports were considered.

NILGA would ask members to note that both the RTC and the RTOB are advisory bodies, and in this context councils, 12 councillors and a body of officers are being brought together to consider progress or otherwise in terms of implementation bodies (the Voluntary Transition Committees & the Working Groups, see below) and to discuss strategic issues & concerns in regard to the LG Reform Programme. NILGA remains of the view that governance, two tier political scrutiny, elected member representation, legislation, resources planning / management (staff and assets) and finances to do the job properly all need refining and agreeing.

Accordingly, NILGA representation to the DoE Minister and the Permanent Secretary has occurred weekly since March 2012, including formally on 31st May 2012 (NILGA meeting request and proposals for enhanced ownership / data sharing offered), 4th and 9th July 2012 (proposals for representation and key issues communicated) and 13th August 2012 (NILGA Office Bearers and SOLACE representative met the Minister to reiterate proposals and concerns).

Working Groups

The attached tabulated summary brings together a record of activity for the 9 Working Groups, and the sub groups which have emerged for some of them, e.g. Transfer of Functions, Finance and Community Planning. The information is presented to assist members to gauge the totality of implementation work which has occurred, so that each member can gain a high level, regional perspective on the Reform Programme. More detailed information will be presented to the Regional Transition Operational Board and the Regional Transition Committee as per the DoE's mechanisms, and it is of course imperative that such information is communicated to all councils, councillors and staff at the earliest possible juncture

Working Group	No. Of Meetings	Key Issues / Sub Groups (SGs) Proposed / Established	Notes
Communications	3	Terms of reference, communications audit, key consultees, holding seminars, communications plan, lessons from previous reform programmes	
Community Planning	3 (*)	Terms of reference, 3 year work plan, community planning pilots, transferring functions linkages, resources, communication, evaluation, community involvement elected member leadership	(*) <i>inc SG</i>
Finance	3	Terms of reference, work plan, SGs on cost benefit analysis of reform, reform funding, special responsibility allowance, rates / debt convergence, assets & liabilities, expenditure controls	
Human Resources	1	Terms of reference, work plan discussion	
Legislation	0		
LG Reform Joint Forum	1	Terms of reference, governance, work plan, timetable, recruitment / development of staff, HR implementation issues, existing JF agreements	
Programme Delivery	3	Terms of reference, revisit 2009 advisory notes, proposals for establishment of STCs, reporting templates for VTCs / STCs, risk register, key milestones, implementation template and integration of communication	
System Convergence	0		
Transfer of Functions	3	Terms of reference, governance, composition, draft work programme, SGs on planning, urban / rural regeneration, roads, economic development, health, recreation & social outcomes	<i>Some SGs have also met - e.g. Econ Dev and Planning</i>

(* from 25th April 2012 to 28th August 2012)

Additional Comment

- NILGA's draft Corporate Plan advocates strong local government, which determines (page 6) "bottom up, locally driven, policies, services and communication". It also seeks (page 8) to "actively contribute to the delivery of local government reform between 2012 and 2015 in a wholly customer focussed manner, supporting and where appropriate adapting the mechanisms in place to ensure greater benefit to local people".
- NILGA considers that the Vision which underpinned the original Reform process needs to be re-established, through engagement with all councils, all councillors and the community we collectively serve.
- Until delivery mechanisms are enhanced, until a dedicated suite of resources, negotiated in partnership and coming from the two tiers of government is established and until a wider, whole system review of public service provision in NI is realised, Reform is merely a process which will begin and end with a transfer and a transition, yet without transformation.
- **We are far from the Vision of strong, dynamic local government as befits community driven, localised decision taking. The goal of achieving the provision of public services with councils, local elected members and the NI Assembly determining a shared Programme for Government has been lost in translation.**
- **However, the Vision will not be forgotten and remains a "must have". It will be applied with renewed vigour and with an unrelenting campaign by NILGA – your Local Government Association.**

NILGA - Your Local Government Association

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