

SAVING OUR COUNCILS. SUSTAINING OUR COMMUNITY.

NILGA PRESIDENT CRISIS ACTION UPDATE FOR FULL COUNCIL MEETINGS.

As President of the 11 councils' Local Government Association, I am sending this short, urgent message to elected members and senior officers across our region to inform and be informed by you as we deal with Covid-19 and plan for social and economic recovery. Since mid-March, NILGA has - like all of you - completely refocused our work.

1. FINANCIAL SURVIVAL: NILGA and partners have collated and sent financial impact evidence and is lobbying national government and Stormont to get cash into councils. With collective local authority losses per calendar month of just under £11 million, we have targeted key Departments including Communities, Finance and DAERA, plus the NIO, Secretary of State and Treasury to seek a substantial proportion of these first phase losses (using a 16 week model running to end of June 2020). The work of SOLACE, ALGFO and NILGA, together with wider lobbying by e.g. APSE and the Local Government Associations in England, Scotland and Wales continues relentlessly, in an integrated, dynamic way, including a collective push for Treasury / NIO to offer a Crisis Fund to each council and to underwrite the forecast hundreds of millions of pounds of lost rates income this financial year.

2. FINANCIAL FLEXIBILITY: I have personally written and engaged further with the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds MLA, to seek radical change in EU economic development funding criteria set by this department and its agencies, so that unspent monies can be diverted to council staff and projects dealing with recovery, rather than projects suspended or cancelled due to the pandemic. This criteria change, based on council information, would release several million pounds into local economies and local government's hard-pressed business support staffing. Tweaking criteria is NOT ENOUGH. Additionally, local councils now have places on both the NI wide Economic Forum and the recently formed NI Tourism Support Group.

3. FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: NILGA's Chief Executive has a weekly engagement with the UK Local Government Forum's financial survival group, which directly challenges Treasury at national level to support BOTH the NI Assembly and our 11 councils. We must collectively increase the contingency funding in NI, which currently sits at under £100 million, with financial asks, totalling over £1 billion. We as a region and a community deserve and must seek more.

4. CORPORATE GOVERNANCE & POLITICAL SCRUTINY: NILGA's policy guidance, partner co-ordination and cross council, cross departmental participation, communicating very closely with SOLACE and senior officer groups, ensured legislation effective from 1st May agreed by the NI Executive to enable councils to take decisions via virtual meetings, offering you much needed flexibility around decision taking, the scheduling of AGMs, whilst we also are seeking investment for new technology required in councils to ensure compliance.

5. STRONG PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES: The co-ordination by NILGA of the NI Strategic Waste Partnership, working closely with the all-council and departmental officer teams on this plus the Civil Contingencies Group, has achieved the very best, collegiate, public health response possible, with work and communications on Recycling, Kerbside Collections and Fly Tipping relayed daily to individual councils in order for planning and delivery to be refined at local level, with staff safety, the public's health, service delivery & risk / resource management remaining the paramount issues.

6. VULNERABLE PEOPLE SUPPORTED: Colleagues in the Department of Communities have welcomed suggested improvements by NILGA Executive members to the hugely valuable Food Parcel distribution process and will continue to work with councils at local level, to maintain and enhance this extraordinary service for those in greatest need.

7. PLANNING ECONOMIC RECOVERY: NILGA's Regional Economy Group, covering all councils and with a member and officer team, have completely refocussed policy and practical work to deliver on local economic recovery and rebuilding, with support now offered by bodies including Enterprise NI and the Construction Employers' Federation. It is now scheduling virtual meetings and will provide important information to the Tourism and Business Groups established through Stormont per 2. above.

8. WORKFORCE PLANNING & SUPPORT: Strong lobbying by NILGA and councils has produced more definition on the potential of furloughing within our 10,500 workforce. Prior to the recently received departmental guidance, NILGA's "four tests" to determine a furloughing framework was distributed to all councils with excellent feedback. I have written to all council Mayors / Chairs / Chiefs to personally thank the entire local government team of workers, regardless of their specific titles and roles, thanking each and every one of them, as I know you have within each council, since without them none of the many heroic responses would have been achieved.

9. COMMUNICATING WHAT MATTERS: Every day NILGA issues essential ministerial, policy, financial, legislative and community information drawn from strategic partners on both social media and website, as required by government departments. Best practice and key information from each council is also communicated widely to partners. See / follow @NI_LGA (Twitter) and www.nilga.org scrolling news / front page.

10. PAY NEGOTIATION & EVIDENCE: Despite the pandemic, this vital national pay bargaining role continues by NILGA members, for our 11 councils, with regular, co-ordinated input from and feedback to councils on Employers Pay Negotiations for 2020/21. In what is undoubtedly a year like no other, fair and affordable pay remains a vital must do on councils' behalf. NILGA this year is leading the National Association of Regional Employers (NARE) 11 region group, which will ensure key, free, essential advice on member development and resilience, change management and the formulation of post Covid-19 training – NILGA planning for and designing this NOW will save all councils both time and money.

11. POLICY & LEARNING NETWORKS - PLAN AHEAD, DELIVER FASTER & BETTER: In addition to the economy group, per 7. above, the 5, all-council, member-officer groups will schedule engagements to be informed by YOUR council, & inform the NILGA Executive, on matters to include post Covid-19 business continuity, post crisis corporate planning and strategy, new financial models, service transformation and public service reform. If we fail to plan, we plan to fail.

12. COUNCILS CO-LEADING THE PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT: I have called for the Political Partnership Panel to be re-instated as soon as possible, even during this pandemic, in order to position all councils, NILGA, senior elected members and officers within this statutory body, alongside Ministers, so that we can JOINTLY, with the Legislative Assembly, regenerate through integrated work and investment, agreeing a Programme for Government that is driven by citizens. The re-establishment of this by NILGA and the Department for Communities will be informed by your council and your 10 counterparts. We are stronger together.

Colleagues, the above is just a short summary of the Association's work. I thank you and your council for joining together, as a local government family, in such a positive and professional manner. We remain as councils united in cause, and NILGA is unwavering in our support to you, your corporate councils and the community we jointly serve. Please work / communicate with your NILGA members in helping us to help you.

Frances Burton

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