

## **NILGA response to the Consultation on a Draft Outcomes Framework for the Programme for Government (NI)**

**18<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

The following paper has been drafted in response to the Executive Office (TEO) consultation on a Draft Outcomes Framework for the forthcoming Programme for Government.

The response is all council and regional (all NI) in emphases, recognising that individual local authorities will have local strategic priorities.

This was presented and developed by NILGA's all council Reform, Devolution, and Improvement Network on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2021, with TEO attendance, and has subsequently been refined and endorsed by councils, SOLACE and the NILGA all council Executive which met on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2021 and approved the piece.

The consultation document is structured around a framework of nine outcomes, setting the priorities for and presenting a picture of the kind of society we would like to be. These are:

- \*Our children and young people have the best start in life
- \*We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment
- \*We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect
- \*We all enjoy healthy active lives
- \*Everyone can reach their potential
- \*Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced, and carbon-neutral
- \*Everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other
- \*We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives
- \*People want to live, work, and visit here

**However, NILGA has submitted key offers and asks of the councils in this response, rather than just simply responding to the framework questions provided.**

**Whilst NILGA accepts that the response to this consultation is required by 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2021, it considers this date to be only the first step in what will be a longer-term material involvement / policy development process by councils and NILGA throughout the design and delivery of the new Programme for Government, underpinned by the principles of subsidiarity and co-design.**

**Derek McCallan, Chief Executive, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021.**

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

NILGA, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, is the constituted, representative body for district councils in Northern Ireland. NILGA represents and promotes the interests of the 11 Northern Ireland district councils; its membership is drawn from councillors and its work is informed fully by senior officers. The Association welcomes the opportunity to participate in the discussion around the Programme for Government for Northern Ireland. We trust that the views outlined below which have also been considered by councils and supported by SOLACE, will be applied as policy is developed and finalised, in collaboration with local government, beyond this submission deadline.

## 2.0 SUMMARY & INITIAL COMMENTS

NILGA welcomes this consultation but at the outset strongly asserts that for any Programme for Government to work, and for sustainable recovery from (in this case the pandemic) and major global disruption, ***localised investment, via better resourced Councils***, is key.

Government at all levels can move from a transactional approach to a relational approach, from effort to impact, devolving power and resources and in so doing, embed trust, adopting a genuinely radical shift in focus, and apply the greater localisation of the public purse to produce the better health, life satisfaction and happiness as espoused in the PfG framework.

The response to the pandemic has gained a very clear appreciation that local councils are the means to develop regional and national policy and investment, drawing in community-based knowledge and solutions and applying this effectively. The PfG framework for councils must go way beyond being invited to engagement exercises, road shows & implementation events, then implementing central policy. Developing a culture of communication and policy design as equal partners in existing structures, would be a positive start, which when it happens is readily welcomed.

Local government must therefore have a design, delivery, measurement and scrutiny role throughout, with both NILGA and SOLACE convening the appropriate corporate and technical input ***inclusive of all councils***. That is the norm, in practice, elsewhere and should be applied in NI immediately, through instruments like the NI Partnership Panel. Community Planning should also be fully recognised as a delivery vehicle, with the proviso that councils should be the hubs of cross departmental, central – local, investment in each Plan’s priorities, which are locality & citizen led – like the PfG framework purports to be.

For the PfG to be delivered thoroughly, and effectively, noting councils desire and capacity to be practical and political partners, Regeneration Powers should be legislatively enabled in this Assembly’s mandate. This too, would be a means by which the PfG framework would be improved, through ***localised investment, via better resourced Councils***.

This response provides commentary on the draft outcomes and key priorities (at 3.0), context in terms of the essential collaborative delivery partnership with local government (at 4.0), and critique in terms of the limitations of OBA and potential for improved delivery (at 5.0).

This response like the consultation itself, is provided during a time of extreme stress to the economy and society as a whole, in Northern Ireland and across the globe. This massive shock to the system will have implications for future decisions and investment. Some of the changes will be fleeting and will revert to 'normal' once the danger from the virus has receded, some changes will be longer term, and some will be permanent.

NILGA asserts that there are some certainties upon which we can build, such as building a new economy, health prioritisation and the need to decarbonise. These certainties should be localised and the hub role of councils fully recognised and resourced.

An additional key feature is the UK's departure from the EU and the complexities particular to Northern Ireland. NILGA's commissioned work (due at the start of April 2021) on EU exit, and local government / community impacts, will be supplementary information provided beyond this deadline, summarily in respect of PfG and other linked consultations such as ISNI.

NILGA welcomes the intent to work more closely with councils and with other partners outside the nine government departments. This intent, in itself, brings the need to consider ***what constitutes effective partnership and accountability***, detailed later in this response. NILGA asserts that working in real partnership with local government must and will make a big difference - where most people locally need and see the benefits most. We trust that a contemporary, strengthened approach to partnership can be taken, building on the knowledge and experience developed through delivery of the current PfG and the clear success in a collaborative central-local approach which came to the fore in dealing with the pandemic.

The PfG apart from being strategic and overarching should be utilised as a statutory change tool, in terms of flexible, thorough, appropriate, investment and measurement, as is the case for example in New Zealand. In this way alone, the PfG would be ground breaking. It needs to be.

***NILGA provides an Executive for all councils and as such presents an important axis for the NI Executive itself, including on design, delivery and scrutiny of the emerging PfG.***

### 3.0 COMMENTARY ON KEY SECTIONS OF THE DRAFT OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

- **CONSULTATION INTRODUCTION**

NILGA, at the time, welcomed the key points made in the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) document, and in particular the resolve to develop the Programme for Government through better local engagement and co-design. We agree with the Executive’s aspiration that the Programme should recognise and proactively respond to the dependencies and interconnections in public policy and that it should focus on the things that matter most to people.

NILGA views this draft Framework of nine Outcomes, as a critical first step. We are keen to assist in the Framework’s development towards an ambitious and effective vision for the future, and are acutely aware that getting this right is key to everything that flows from it:

- Knowing how to measure success and where, as a society we currently are (baseline),
- Identifying partners who together can help achieve transformational improvements, and
- Learning and understanding what works well and what does not.

The Framework sets out draft wording for the Outcomes and incorporates some early thinking around what the key priority areas might be under each Outcome. NILGA concurs with the Department, in that it will be crucially important to get the wording (and **clear adherence** by all departments / partner bodies of this wording) of the Outcomes right, as they will provide the starting point for long-term strategic planning by the Executive, fully involving local government in strategies and actions moving forward.

NILGA strongly believes that a full review of competencies in our public sector is required as a priority, to match outcomes and impacts with fully qualified, suitably commissioned (e.g., from other sectors), trained/ re-trained and motivated personnel across the delivery teams. Modern capacity and competencies are crucial, and the co-ordination & delivery bodies must be in possession of both.

We welcome the learning from the pandemic that is in evidence throughout the document and the emphasis on “working collaboratively with those who have the skills, knowledge and expertise to bring about positive change and to get things done”. This collaboration should also include resourcing. NILGA asserts that local government is well placed to collaborate with wider government on this basis, with the proviso that collaborative resourcing must follow – such as in regard to the 11 Community Plans, being very strong knowledge banks for what is needed across NI, as well as engines for growth, social cohesion and environmental custody. ***The Pfg must formally recognise and resource their value.***

NILGA reasserts that councils are a partner *in* not for government, locally as authorities and convenors, and regionally through NILGA itself, within the public sector, rather than categorised as consultees within civic society.

Council-led Community Planning Partnerships, as above mentioned, are a mechanism presently under exploited and under resourced, furthermore our City and Growth deals are mentioned several times in the document (although without mention of councils as a delivery lead). Councils should be more explicitly referenced as wording is vital to leadership, and local leadership is vital to the emerging PfG. This is of course commonplace in neighbouring jurisdictions so is not an exceptional “ask” but rather a significant “offer”.

NILGA supports the principles behind using an outcomes-based approach and the link with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and it welcomes the international approach to performance improvement brought by use of the SDGs. We also support the new PfG being a ‘living’ document, responsive to developing need for change and improvement, and trust that with additional consultation that ways to develop local government’s contribution to PfG, and councils’ sustainability, will be full and clear. As such, processes and criteria related to adapting the PfG and investing in it, must be modernised and proofed against adverse change, such as long-term emergencies, medical, climate, economic or otherwise, and collapse of institutions such as Stormont.

### **Supporting Strategies**

NILGA will be offering comment as to inclusion of relevant policy and strategy under the nine outcomes, however it is highlighted that there are a number of ‘core’ strategic documents fundamental to supporting the Programme for Government, including the Investment Strategy, Economy Strategy and Anti-poverty/Social Strategy. NILGA welcomes the recognition of climate change as a key issue and is of the view that a Carbon Budget should now be made a core component of this suite of strategies, given the renewed focus on climate action expressed in the NDNA document, development of a Climate Change Bill notwithstanding.

- **OUR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE THE BEST START IN LIFE**

Although we note that pathways to employment are dealt with under the “everyone can reach their potential” outcome, NILGA would be keen to see inclusion of some wording here, similar to *“We want to ensure all our children and young people have access to the high-quality education they all deserve and are equipped with the skills to help them make the best life choices and to access employment opportunities.”*

## **Key Priority Areas**

NILGA is largely content with the Key Priority Areas as expressed but would be keen to see acknowledgement of the role of youth work within the document, particularly in relation to the “Capability and Resilience” heading.

- **WE LIVE AND WORK SUSTAINABLY – PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT**

NILGA strongly welcomes the recognition of climate change as a key issue and is largely content with this section of the document.

## **Key Priority Areas**

Although we strongly support the Circular Economy Strategy’s inclusion in the list of supporting strategies, we believe that more could be made of the role of the Department for Economy in relation to reuse and reprocessing of materials under the ‘waste management’ priority.

We would recommend that there is a pressing need to include an ammonia strategy in the strategy list, potentially adding action on ammonia and clean air – with resources given to those best placed to act on this priority.

We also note the need to review and contemporise the now out of date biodiversity strategy, so welcome the inclusion of biodiversity under the ‘natural environment’ priority.

- **WE HAVE AN EQUAL AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETY WHERE EVERYONE IS VALUED AND TREATED WITH RESPECT**

NILGA is largely content with this section of the document, with the identified priorities and with the list of supporting strategies.

- **WE ALL ENJOY LONG, HEALTHY, ACTIVE LIVES**

NILGA is largely content with this section of the document and with the list of supporting strategies.

## **Key Priority Areas**

NILGA agrees with the Key Priority Areas as listed, but also notes the importance of outdoor activity, for the enhancement of mental and emotional wellbeing. This aspect could be drawn out more in the document as it is also noted that ‘access to open space’ is not included as a priority under any of the outcomes. The recent pandemic experience would indicate that this is a greater priority than previously thought.

- **EVERYONE CAN REACH THEIR POTENTIAL**

NILGA is largely content with this section of the document and with the list of supporting strategies. The strong link with the “Our children and young people have the best start in life” outcome is noted.

### **Key Priorities**

In terms of the ‘Better Jobs’ priority, NILGA would suggest that introducing entrepreneurship at an early stage in the education curriculum should be included within this priority since it has the capacity to inspire young people to take their future into their own hands. In addition, providing adequate childcare would be one step towards addressing economic inactivity.

The ‘Skills & Attainment’ priority must address the under supply of mid & high-level tier skills, particularly since the pandemic has reinforced this skills challenge. We welcome the support for vocational pathways and apprenticeships, which must have parity of esteem with academic qualifications, particularly to ensure inclusive workplaces.

NILGA would query the ‘Sports, Arts & Culture’ priority as described in the document. We welcome the inclusion of support for the creative industries and delivery for the arts, cultural and language sectors, but there is no mention of sport under this heading, nor any inclusion of sport in the supporting strategy list. We note the importance of physical activity within “We enjoy long, healthy active lives” outcome and the inclusion of the Sport and Physical Activity Strategy in that section of the document, so the inclusion of sport here may have been an oversight. As a key investor in the sport and leisure sector, councils would support inclusion of sport (as an industry) under this outcome.

- **OUR ECONOMY IS GLOBALLY COMPETITIVE, REGIONALLY BALANCED AND CARBON-NEUTRAL**

NILGA is largely content with the identified priorities and with the list of supporting strategies.

We welcome the inclusion of sustainability as a principle for our economy within this outcome. It is now critically important for Northern Ireland to work towards carbon neutrality and to grow rapidly, the number of ‘green’ jobs and skills that will be necessary to achieve this.

NILGA welcomes the intent to ensure our food production is sustainable but has concerns in relation to the mechanisms to be used for increasing productivity, which could include increased intensification of livestock farming, thereby posing further risks to the environment. This will be a difficult dichotomy to address and efforts by many in the farming community to address carbon reduction which in turn makes our soil more fertile for crops, must be supported.

NILGA asserts that a radical re-think of food production to minimise imports, improve labelling, reduce food miles and instil further investment and pride in purchasing high quality, seasonal, local, Northern Ireland produce is critical to strategies and priorities.

### **Key Priorities**

NILGA suggests that within the 'Competing Globally' priority, that rather than simply dealing with the outworking of the EU Exit Protocol, there is an opportunity to maximise the benefits of Northern Ireland's situation & unique status. A revised International Relations Strategy must be brought forward to enable full attainment of this priority.

NILGA welcomes the 'Green Economy' heading but we believe this section could be expanded to include mention of increasing the number of 'green jobs' and support for existing and start-up circular economy businesses. Incentivising industry to innovate should also be a focus of this priority.

In terms of the innovation priority, NILGA would suggest that forging links between industry, universities and colleges will be a critical success factor.

The Association is keen to see reduction as above mentioned, in 'food miles' associated with local food production and consumption, and therefore strongly welcomes the mention of 'improving resilience and supply chain integration' under the 'Food, Farming and Fishing' priority. Councils are already playing a successful role in this and this should be developed.

- **EVERYONE FEELS SAFE – WE ALL RESPECT THE LAW AND EACH OTHER**

NILGA supports this section of the document, with the identified priorities and with the list of supporting strategies; we recognise the strong links to the 'equal and inclusive society' outcome.

- **WE HAVE A CARING SOCIETY THAT SUPPORTS PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES**

NILGA is supportive of this section of the document, with the identified priorities and with the list of supporting strategies; we again recognise the strong links to the 'equal and inclusive society' outcome.

- **PEOPLE WANT TO LIVE, WORK AND VISIT HERE**

NILGA is largely content with this section of the document, with the identified priorities and with the list of supporting strategies. We particularly welcome the recognition of the impact the pandemic and the UK's departure from the EU have had and continue to have on life here for some years to come. However, NILGA would recommend that greater priority should be given

to the tourism industry locally, through councils, in light of the impact the pandemic has had on the sector.

### **Key Priority Areas**

We support the Executive in its aims to meet international environment standards and to build societal respect, recognising the importance this can have for attracting foreign investors.

We would assert that the ‘Competing Globally’ priority must ensure that medium and high skilled jobs are created in Northern Ireland, and that efforts must be made to ensure we optimise the potential for Northern Ireland from our inclusion in the European Single Market for goods.

In addition to digital access, encouraging investment in new technologies, processes and systems; and upskilling in digital technology must be a focus of the ‘Growth’ priority.

### **4.0 DELIVERY – BUILDING A ‘PARTNERSHIP OF EQUALS’ WITH COUNCILS**

NILGA welcomes the approach the Executive is taking to developing a long term, multi-year strategic Programme for Government (PfG), that is:

- Developed through engagement and co-design, using an Outcomes-Based Approach,
- Focussed on prosperity and wellbeing for all,
- Establishing a shared and ambitious strategic vision for the future,
- Providing for accountable and transparent monitoring and reporting arrangements.

NILGA wishes to fully develop the recognition of the need to proactively respond to the dependencies that exist between different strands of public policy – based on the things that matter most to people (health, happiness and life satisfaction).

NILGA asserts that a fundamental transformation of societal development progress and public service improvement in the areas that matter most to people requires a radical shift in focus from **“effort” to “impact”**. Delivering impact requires a whole societal approach, in which local government must be an equal partner, with the Assembly and with citizens’ organisations throughout Northern Ireland. ***Both the need for this and its potential for achievement have been illustrated during the current pandemic context at a previously unheard-of pace.***

NILGA therefore requests that local government is fully involved in the development of cluster and cross cutting work associated with this draft PfG – in a partnership of equals with the nine government departments. An equal partnership of this type demands intense engagement in the development and agreement of the policies in the PfG and associated workplans, not simply invitations to engagement exercises, road shows, implementation events and similar activities.

NILGA fully supports the emergence of high level strategic and operational engagement between council Chief Executives and other Senior Officers of councils, with Permanent Secretaries and other senior Civil Servants as part of the previous draft Programme for Government implementation and the subsequent alignment with local government community plans. It is to be regretted that such meaningful collaborative structures had to be scaled back when the Assembly collapsed, just as they were getting into their stride. NILGA urges the Executive Office, with SOLACE, to reinforce and reform – aligned to new PfG, post-Covid determinants – such engagement with strategic personnel in councils and all SROs, to enable integration, joint design of measurement and performance indicators as well as appropriate, proportionate, audit requirements as befits the draft PfG and the Outcomes Based Approach.

While the present (approximately) 95%/5% split between central and local government spend gives central government dominance in budget terms, the implementation of its policies depends greatly on willing and creative implementation at local level, so that the responsibility for the outcomes to be achieved is much more equally shared. So, too, should proportionate resources, with the current ratio being untenable and not an enabling model for PfG to be locally embedded – therefore the PfG should explicitly recognise the need for a remodelling of public sector finances and a move to augment council finances as part of this should be written in.

Additionally, such work should be ***politically and democratically scrutinised and directed***, utilising existing statutory instruments; in particular, the Partnership Panel for N. Ireland, involving NILGA / council elected members, is crucial to ***leadership of and institutional investment*** in this transformed PfG.

NILGA's all council Executive, and Reform, Devolution and Improvement Policy & Learning Network should be utilised to enable political, corporate integration and shared communication, aligned to the work advocated above, between Perm Secs and Council Chiefs and as such NILGA would welcome follow up with TEO in this regard.

NILGA will also seek (and has been asked) to engage regularly with the TEO Committee to enable review, scrutiny and performance discussions and significantly with all Ministers.

## 5.0 PATHWAYS TO OUTCOMES

### Outcomes - Based Approaches

This part of our response will focus on the Outcomes-Based approach and will consider the challenges associated with ensuring coherence and alignment between outcomes and indicators, and potential ways of addressing these challenges.

It is widely accepted that population outcomes, such as the nine drafted in this consultation, are broad and aspirational, with more definition being provided by the indicators chosen to represent progress towards them. However, as discussed in NIAR 362-2020<sup>1</sup> while the indicators currently selected are relevant and valuable, when taken together they do not comprehensively capture progress towards the whole set of outcomes desired. It has to be recognised that indicators chosen for each outcome, valuable as they may be, will never precisely represent the full complexity and scope of that outcome. As discussed in NIAR 362-2020<sup>2</sup>, there will always be a gap between an outcome and the indicator which represent it. However, the challenge is to ensure that this gap is kept as small as possible.

By way of example, NIAR 362-2020, considers Outcome 12 of the previous Outcomes Delivery Plan, 'We give our children and young people the best start in life.' This outcome, the paper explained does not provide any further detail. For instance, what is the upper age limit on 'young people'? What, definitively, constitutes the 'best start' for this population<sup>3</sup>?

The six indicators chosen to represent progress towards it are:

- % of babies born at low birth weight
- % of children at appropriate stage of development in immediate preschool year
- % of schools found to be good or better
- Gap between the percentage of Free School Meal eligible school leavers, and non-eligible school leavers, achieving at Level 2+ including English and Maths
- % school leavers achieving at Level 2 + including English and Maths
- % care leavers who, aged 19, were in education, training and employment

NILGA suggests that to overcome this gap between an outcome and the indicators that represent it, each of the population Outcomes in the draft Framework of Outcomes should be further

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<sup>1</sup>Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Library Services (Jan 2021) *Outcomes Based Accountability and the Programme for Government*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

analysed to map the different pathways by which that outcome might be achieved. The technique of drawing up 'Pathways to Outcomes' is a methodology which has been used extensively both internationally (e.g., the 'logical frameworks' of the World Bank) and in the UK (e.g., the 'theory of change' models which have been given much attention in UK government evaluations (see Bovaird, 2012)<sup>4</sup>.

NILGA respectfully asserts that traditionally there has been a focus on ***developing an analytical understanding of public service policy areas*** by breaking down or 'deconstructing' that policy area into the different parts of the underlying service system. Analysis is, of course, fundamental to understanding. However, it has severe limitations, and it is commendable that this is changing. A very different approach to understanding involves using synthesis, rather than just analysis. This requires building up to desired outcomes, not breaking down from those outcomes into lower-level activities; it involves 'constructing', not just 'deconstructing' – to gain an understanding of the whole system, not just of separate parts of the system. In measurement terms alone, this change in "what is successful?" has to be culturally embedded organisationally and learned for those applying the approach. Pathways to Outcomes represents a tried and tested technique incorporating both analysis and synthesis, enabling greater understanding of complex systems and therefore promoting coherence and alignment between outcomes and their indicators, at the higher level of policy, and the varied initiatives and interventions which constitute the practical levels of policy. NILGA welcomes the openness in the PfG framework to embrace different approaches to measurement.

A Pathways to Outcomes approach can help to reduce the gap between outcomes and the indicators chosen to demonstrate achievement of those outcomes. However, getting a better performance measurement system is not the whole story. If, as this draft PfG Framework of Outcomes suggests, the current role of the public sector in Northern Ireland is to improve wellbeing, as represented by the nine Outcomes proposed, then coherence and alignment in terms of action and impact are key. To do this, the architecture of the public service needs to be fully remodelled. ***Locality based modelling with councils as an axis between local people and wider policy & investment machinery***, is one tested means to that positive end.

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Bovaird (2012), "Attributing outcomes to social policy interventions – 'gold standard' or 'fool's gold' in public policy and management?" *Social Policy and Administration*, Vol. 48 (1): 1 – 23.

## Understanding challenges by drawing up pathways to outcomes – a generic model

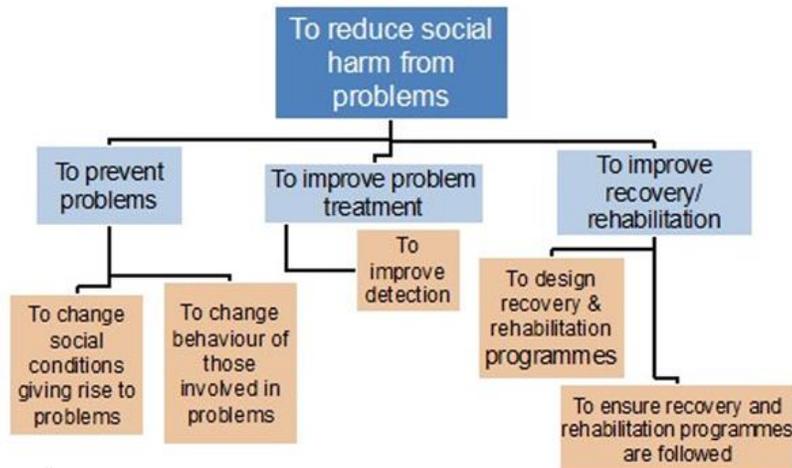


Figure 1:

The broad, aspirational nature of currently suggested Outcomes, together with the challenges posed by indicators which do not fully cover the aspirations embedded within those Outcomes, means we need to have an approach which recognises that we can never represent the full complexity and scope of each Outcome by *purely analytical* models. Therefore, the knowledge and the best efforts of all stakeholders can be incorporated into both the planning and implementation processes. This means achieving a ‘social’ approach to improving outcomes, beyond a ‘technical’ performance measurement approach, and it entails bringing in citizens and government’s partners. Without their experience and their ability to add to and see beyond the narrow analyses which emerge from performance measurement approaches, the Outcomes to which NI aspires are unlikely to be fully achieved. We look forward to further engagement with TEO, to discuss how this social process can be achieved more successfully in the future.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

NILGA and councils are willing and able to work with wider government, business and the public to begin to meet the challenges outlined by the draft Outcomes Framework, and we look forward contributing to all further stages of drafting of the Programme for Government, and to its subsequent delivery and continued improvement.

NILGA requests that the outcomes of this consultation include material involvement by this Association, councils and wider local government including SOLACE in the actual PfG design, development and review, using the Association's Executive, wider membership and the Partnership Panel.

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