

Developing Local Government 2021-2023



**Councils
Make It
Happen**

#councilsmakeithappen



A. Local Government's Vision & Development – A Framework to the 2023 Election – Council Consultation.

Emerging from the pandemic is a time for **reflection, action and new vision**.

Strong local government, investing in local people and places, with 11 councils empowered, skilled and resourced, delivering high-quality leadership, services and representation for the whole community, working in innovative, accountable partnership.

NILGA sees this vision for local government as key to a better democracy and improved public services across NI.

Reflecting on the role of councils, at the height of a world pandemic, local government delivered everything required of it, and more besides. All councils did so efficiently and effectively, tailoring their decisions and **actions** to local need. Over £130 million in service and other Covid related income deficits placed already fragile finances on red alert. Dynamic partnership, within councils and between councils, in the latter instance co-ordinated by NILGA and SOLACE on an emergency footing throughout 2020/21, through to today, has led to the recovery of much of this deficit from the NI Executive and Treasury, new investment for 2021/22 to keep councils sustainable, and a new impetus to re-model how councils are funded, to mitigate against red alerts of any type ever again.

Prudent rates struck by all councils for 2021/22 reflect the deficit recovery funding and the efficiencies deployed to minimise ratepayer impact and maximise essential service delivery. Understanding the roles and responsibilities, together with the potential within local government, was stepped up as part of evidence lobbying and negotiation. “Councils Make it Happen” visually illustrates the community and collective value of local government in Northern Ireland and this NILGA campaign continues well into recovery and 2021.

However, as council members and officers know, there is no time to waste. Councils, NILGA and SOLACE will continue the strategic push for more resources, locally designed and applied by local government, on matters like the Shared Prosperity and Levelling Up Funds – multi-million, multi-annual investment designed to replace EU funds which councils spent wisely in their communities. Similarly, regeneration powers and resources must come equally and fully to all councils. The Councillor Code of Conduct has outlived its original design back in 2015. Experience has taught everyone – particularly today’s councillors - that we cannot offer this Code to new elected members without major revisions. New ways of working with central government must be ramped up, with councils protected legislatively for any new burdens coming to them, and with members and officers alike gaining new skills, learning and development to keep pace with technological change and a **modern Programme for Government** (PfG) that has locality-based budgets at its policy centre, and which recognises Community and Local Development Planning as being key to its delivery – fuelling engines of local economic development, environmental custody and social

cohesion. We have neither the budget nor the wish to outsource the future of local government to consultants. We want to tap into the excellence and commitment that is within.

This **two-year framework** takes us to the Council Elections of 2023. NILGA seeks high level feedback and input from each Council in regard to finalising and fulfilling this Vision, the actions and their development. Feedback from the 11 councils will lead to the development of a series of regional actions, applied and agreed locally, by each sovereign council. As part of it, NILGA's governance, resources and products will be aligned to ensure that all member councils and strategic partners, working within and alongside the Association, do so in an explicitly joined up manner on matters which strengthen local government.

Collaboration works. Other regional bodies (like SOLACE and the Local Government Training Group) and council services (like waste management, local development, community and emergency planning) will benefit from innovation and improvements. **Local government is changing. This framework and consultation seeks to ensure that councils are the change makers rather than having changes imposed on them by other institutions and /or events.**

The framework has been drawn from substantial engagement and work across councils pre and during pandemic, by NILGA and others, including the corporate responses to formal consultation on devolution and the future roles and resources of local government in the Programme for Government. It provides a platform for the necessary evolution of councils as we enter a totally new economic, health and public service landscape here and around the world. It offers self-determination and enables the sector's development, and whilst focussing on councils themselves it will materially assist in making the case for stronger local government to the devolved Assembly and nationally, together with other key strategic partners across business and the community.

The framework will underpin and influence NILGA's Corporate (Electoral Term) Plan to June 2023 and its annual work plan for & with councils but also looks ahead, beyond the two-year core period, in terms of forecast activity, to assist the Association and the wider sector to *better plan and to be more sustainable*. It provides explanatory context and suggested delivery detail, abridged into five themes and three main emphases.

5 Key Themes Identified:

- 1. Council sustainability & improvement (e.g., devolution, training, capacity, ethics)**
- 2. Climate Action (e.g., waste/ circular economy, LGCAN, clean air, COP26 outcomes)**
- 3. Community & Economic Development (e.g., anti-poverty, new economy, recovery, skills, digital connectivity & regeneration)**
- 4. Wellbeing and Community Planning (e.g., changing demographics, mental health, biodiversity, Comm Planning review)**
- 5. Planning and infrastructure (e.g., legislation review, LDPs, Planning Training & Conduct, Roads, NI water, green infrastructure)**

Councils, NILGA and SOLACE, including through the NI Partnership Panel and the Association's Policy & Learning Networks, are pinpointed as being the primary means to achieve both the vision and the actions associated with it.

It must be stressed that this framework is by necessity dynamic, complementary and propositional, not analytical, duplicative nor rigid. It offers local government the chance to look ahead, self-direct and improve, with a strong vision to be developed locally by each council and regionally through NILGA & SOLACE.

Noting the five themes above, delivering actions across them will be important. Three categories for action are offered for discussion below:

A. Corporate Relations, Performance & Sustainability

Corporate relations are of course owned by the 11 sovereign councils, NILGA and SOLACE. The sector has many corporate partners locally, regionally, nationally and internationally who, in the new landscape post pandemic, should materially assist local government whether in terms of skills development, new investment opportunities, legislative / policy guidance, best practice in service delivery, and more. NILGA has appointed eleven Strategic Partners that work closely and accountably with the Association to help develop and inform practical and policy ideas for strengthening local government in Northern Ireland.

Actions for consideration:

- (i) Accountable strategic partnerships outside of political and government centres enable community, business, social, environmental and improvement experience to be brought to bear when making decisions, defining policy and advocating positive change. These partners will be scoped out and assessed to ensure they add real value & impact to the Association and to councils. In turn, the assessment will result in new partners and post pandemic policy, investment, capacity and sustainability opportunities for local government – from July 2021. List of existing strategic partners attached per Appendix I
- (ii) A new constitution for NILGA considering Membership, Executive and Networks for AGM 2021 and developed thereafter with councils
- (iii) NILGA Policy & Learning Networks work plus other regional, and sub regional member – officer groupings should be fully scoped to hone added value / impact – from Aug 2021
- (iv) NILGA – SOLACE Protocol & Workplan contemporised & refined by end November 2021.

B. Strategic Policy & Governance

NILGA is constituted to drive in partnership the development of strategic policy and forward planning for the sector and suggests a focus on a small number of key actions, working collaboratively, resulting in more effective policy, legislation and resources for the 11 local councils.

Actions for consideration:

- (i)** An effective Partnership Panel materially linked to the Programme for Government, other strategic member – officer groupings, formally reviewed by end November 2021 (with the Department for Communities) and lobbying central government in respect of performance led evidence-based devolution and sustainable council finances with practical benefits to services, citizens and governance, from July 2021
- (ii)** Research to consider merits of a new Public Affairs Service, to include an evaluation of alternatively available services – designed to provide scanning & reporting of Assembly & Parliamentary committees & questions alongside liaison with MLAs and MPs individually and on a party basis to improve policy & legislation input by / affecting local government & local areas – by end October 2021
- (iii)** Research to consider merits of a strengthened Shared Policy Unit to inform and be informed by our sector: development of capacity and capability – existing (NILGA – Councils) service, cost benefit analysis to strengthen, structure, strategic partners involved, research and application of best international practice, better gathering and use of local data and evidence options by end October 2021 and establish thereafter if appropriate.

C. Improvement & Investment

NILGA will develop and refine its own partnerships ensuring clear, added value, to strengthen links across the public, private & voluntary sector and to offer opportunities for local government to innovate, improve performance and enhance its services, knowledge, skills & expertise. Apart from within NI, we will partner with UK, Irish and other local government associations to (evidence-based) lobby on policy & financial matters which have the potential to affect the local government sector positively or negatively.

As we move through a precarious period for public sector finances, alongside the ending of EU funding and the construct of replacement investments, we will ensure the local government sector is adequately resourced and new models of resourcing including rates re-modelling, are developed, so that councils can continue to deliver for communities.

Actions for consideration:

- (i) Progress to be made on sector improvement and data/evidence provision – owning our own information. Research required – including a comparative exercise with other jurisdictions, by end December 2021, to consider merits of a Service Improvement Hub (if all council desired / owned) and Data Centre (inc. virtual library) by June 2022
- (ii) Progress of shared services & embedding innovation at the heart of local government. This has the potential to generate substantial efficiency savings and revenue generation if the sector takes risks and challenges itself. To do this NILGA – in partnership with all councils - will scope the following actions:
- The delivery of action research – in partnership with SOLACE & councils - on shared services, transformation & improvement to identify what local government requires and can develop, from September 2021 and to align with and adapt *existing* models of improvement.
 - Research to be completed during 2021 on an Innovation by Councils Programme, to scope the potential for innovation and technology to propel local government, identify & learn from best practice and aligned to outcomes of LGTG review and to NILGA's Regional Learning & Development Programme, so as to identify and apply innovative practice in local government, reporting in January 2022.
 - Consider partnership with an organisation(s) to promote & deliver an incentivised “Innovation Challenge” for local government senior practitioners from October 2021
- (iii) Sustainable Funding for Local Government: as councils are place shapers, additional investment in local government brings direct benefit for local communities. We will work to ensure that services and funds that can be best delivered by local government are entrusted to local government and that councils' values are better understood by the rest of government, utilising the Task and Finish Group on Sustainable Councils Finances and reporting in October 2021
- (iv) Digital Technology for members, officers and service improvement: Investigate opportunities for NILGA / SOLACE and other regional bodies to drive and / or promote new offerings for the sector. This could include (research in 2021):
- Increased digital delivery of regional representation, co-ordination and services, to include webinars, policy led training / learning within the Regional Elected Member Development Group and courses
 - Retention of non-digital regional representation, co-ordination and services if it is best to do so, including Conferences and interactive policy development across councils
 - Consideration of the merits of a subscription-based statistics service via the Data Centre for local government and other interested parties to provide dynamic up to date data and evidence required for decision making.

B. Getting It Done in Good Time & Measuring Success

Consultation with Councils will subsequently be collated, referred to all councils and a timeline and measurement tool developed.

Measuring success post-finalisation will very much depend on this being clearly communicated, largely kept to time and outcomes being positively recognised by member councils / partners.

To this end, NILGA & SOLACE will establish a regional and all council inclusive means to assess feedback, and design & manage the framework, with formal results against targets reports provided to the NILGA Executive / SOLACE and onward to councils on a twice-yearly basis in April and September, from 2022.

All work will be completed within existing budgets unless a Business Case for any additional service or personnel is provided within the NILGA – SOLACE protocol.

Good communication in relation to this development framework and its roll out will be vital – across NILGA, SOLACE & councils. Existing communications e.g., for the “Councils Make it Happen” campaign will be utilised and NILGA & SOLACE networks & Council Standing Committees will be formally communicated with to ensure scrutiny.

C. Practical Next Steps

Approval of the Consultation Framework by both NILGA & SOLACE by 20th May 2021, dissemination to councils, as an emerging regional programme, for comment by 9th July 2021.



D. Appendix I – Strategic Policy Partners

See <https://www.nilga.org/about/nilga-strategic-partners> for more detail, but these are:

Association of Public Services Excellence, Centre for Effective Services, Centre for Local Economic Strategies, Development Trusts NI, Enterprise NI, Federation of Small Businesses, Inner City Trust, Strategic Investment Board, Stratagem, Sustainable NI and Social Enterprise NI.

E. Appendix II – Glossary of Terms

Service Improvement Hub – supporting, promoting and improving local government

- Wholly local-government owned and driven.
- Using peer support - experienced councillors and senior officers from across the UK, who support and challenge councils to improve themselves
- Enabling councils to share good practice, with good ideas shared on the NILGA website.
- Elected member development programmes helping councillors become better leaders.
- Promoting the development of local government’s management and workforce?
- Advising councils on improving customer service and value for money.
- Helping councils to tackle difficult challenges.

Public Affairs Service

- Supporting councils as they manage an ever-growing number and variety of responsibilities.
- Informing the NILGA membership of parliamentary and Assembly activity, and political monitoring.
- Developing relationships with MLAs, MPs and parties to influence Assembly & Parliamentary policy & legislation
- Providing support for campaigns

Data and Evidence Centre

Councils possess large amounts of data covering every aspect of their daily activities. This resource is valuable and provides an opportunity for transformative change through effective use in decision making. Transforming data to knowledge with the help of analytics can provide councils with additional information which can help to design better policies and improve business operations.

- A trusted source of information on local government, working closely with NISRA and F&H Education Institutions.
- Aiming to be the NI local government’s centre of choice for data and research.
- Acting as a ‘hub’ of knowledge about and for NI councils, reaching beyond into a wider network of experts, organisations and innovators.
- Developing high impact good practice models and concepts.
- Providing a ‘virtual library’ of information about and for local government in Northern Ireland

Shared Policy Unit

A wholly local government owned and driven shared unit that would

- deal with long-term, cross-cutting issues;
- develop and co-ordinate regional policy for the sector;
- create a flexible pool of ‘experts’ who can be deployed quickly on developing issues – utilising the knowledge and experience of the officer groups;
- enable council officers to co-locate and work with NILGA staff on an ad-hoc basis
- be supported by SOLACE and the NILGA Executive Committee – working at a senior level to scrutinise policy centrally, and link to government.

Innovation Working Group

- Harnessing the power of innovation to accelerate progress towards achieving the vision, aims and objectives of local government
- Initiating, catalysing and enabling the scaling of innovations across the 11 councils – in technological, social, financial, policy and service delivery areas.
- Showing leadership in supporting collaborative efforts among councils and their partners.
- Membership drawn from council officers, with strategic advisors. Reporting to NILGA Executive & SOLACE.

Research and Advisory Service

- Aligned to the Service Improvement Hub, Data centre and Shared Policy Unit;
- Providing an agile proactive and responsive policy research and advisory service on key regional issues, to ensure the policy positions taken by the sector are contemporary, evidence-based and credible.

F. Response by Council

A corporate response by Council is strongly sought, ideally by Friday, 9th July 2021, with high level consideration of

(i) The suitability or otherwise of the Vision Statement

(ii) The suitability or otherwise of the 5 main themes identified

(iii) The suitability or otherwise of each of the 11 actions listed

(iv) Comment by the Council in regard to its own ideas and suggested actions on how the local government sector can be strengthened in a post pandemic environment in the run up to the Local Council elections scheduled for May 2023.

Please send Council’s submission to s.little@nilga.org for the attention of NILGA’s Chief Executive. Thank you for your comments and your committed partnership within the local government sector.