

NILGA Response



The
Executive Office

Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027



Introduction

As the voice for local government, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) welcomes this draft publication and consultation of the Northern Ireland Executive's Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most, the draft Programme for Government 2024-2027. We recognise the progress made in delivering this draft publication. We also recognise the unsustainable path facing our public services and the urgency of the need for root and branch reform for how we deliver public services.

We share the Executive's diagnosis of the scale and complexity of challenges facing public services and we agree that we cannot deliver through governance of old. It is clear that making missions work requires unlocking councils' unique capacity to contribute. Local government touches the lives of everybody, every day, more so than any other public service, but there are sizeable untapped opportunities and areas where we are unable to deliver what we know our communities deserve.

Coinciding with the 10th anniversary of the 11 councils in April 2025, this Programme for Government has to recognise the opportunities afforded by empowering the 11 councils. The last ten years have seen councils across Northern Ireland work as trailblazers for the transformation of public services, but there is more that we can do. A new journey is needed, one which empowers and enables councils to deliver the transformation in Our Plan for a better tomorrow.

Local government stands ready to build on our deep relationships with our community and voluntary sector, businesses and academic institutions and across the UK and Ireland to meet the current and future challenges facing our public services.

Our consultation response reflects that we cannot deliver the transformation needed without empowering local government. Our five principles below speak to the constructive problem-solving mindset of local government and we welcome this first step for an honest conversation on how we work together.

Councillor Alison Bennington, NILGA President 24-25.


Making missions work for local government

Before setting our guiding principles on how a whole-of-government approach can deliver *Our Plan*, it is worth recognising the shifting ground and journey that local government is on.

A new approach

- Rethinking what a Programme for Government offers is an important first step, and we welcome the adoption of a mission-based approach to recognise that long-term and complex challenges require a whole-of-government approach.
- We share the vision in this blueprint for shaping a better tomorrow and recognise the need for long-term missions stems from a welcome recognition that our current culture and systems of governance and public administration cannot deliver the priorities and missions of *Our Plan*.
- Making these missions work requires empowering and enabling local government to play our part in a one public service approach to delivery. It requires new models of governance that will and should be completely different to our existing models and culture.

Empowering local government


- Local government is an essential part of the democratic infrastructure of Northern Ireland and an equal branch of government with an equal democratic mandate.
 - The closeness of both elected members and local government officers to the people they serve is unique and, if enabled appropriately, can truly unlock the power of partnership between government and the communities we serve.
 - This recognition of subsidiarity as part of a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach should embed the principle that decisions and delivery are best implemented as close to the people they affect as possible.
 - The Review of Public Administration was a vital first step in an unfinished journey. To achieve the transformation needed to deliver on the expectations of citizens, we must empower councils and show genuine recognition of the value they can bring in the delivery of the missions.
 - Delivering *Our Plan* has to begin by recognising the co-dependencies that exist across the public, voluntary and community and private sectors, and move beyond the 'long tail' consequences of inaction.
 - What matters now is the scale of collaboration, the depth of partnership and the pace of delivery. There is a significant latent potential from the momentum to transform underway in each of our 11 councils.
 - This is why building upon our five guiding principles offers a constructive basis for an in-depth conversation on how local government can design, deliberate and deliver *Our Plan*.
- 

Guiding principles to empower local government

As the voice for local government, NILGA has offered five guiding principles that are key for the priorities and missions of Our Plan to materialise.

1. A true whole-systems approach
2. Equal partners in transformation
3. Councils as custodians of place
4. Sustainably resourcing missions
5. Whole-systems accountability

1. A true whole-systems approach


- Local government stands ready for a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach that governs for the long term with a vision beyond current political or financial cycles.
 - A wealth of existing strategic alignment between the Programme for Government can be found with councils' Corporate Plans, Community Plans and Local Development Plans. This offers a critical juncture upon which to align local and central government in genuine partnership and recognise co-dependencies.
 - We already see the benefits of a whole system partnership delivery model in local communities, where councils are already convening coalitions between the statutory, voluntary and community and private sectors to deliver change where needed.
 - There have been examples of true partnership between local government and some government departments; however, our public service culture and systems of governance and public administration must embed this across all layers of government.
 - Doing so requires central government to be proactive in orchestrating across departments and councils to strengthen local, sub-regional and national collaboration if we are to deliver the scale of transformation required.
- 

Guiding principles to empower local government

2. Equal partners in transformation

- Councils consistently leave no stone unturned in collaborating and forming partnerships, and our shared commitment to Our Plan is a bedrock for deeper collaboration.
- Encapsulating the spirit of the NI Partnership Panel requires recognising and broadening the delivery bandwidth for Community Planning Partnerships to embed national priorities with local outcomes.
- Across all nine priorities, partnerships and relationships must operate on the basis of mutual trust and respect, and the supporting systems of governance and public administration should have the means to hold us all accountable in this respect.
- We have a unique opportunity to deliver an equal partnership, which will require intense engagement in the design and delivery of the nine priorities and a commitment to tackling unnecessary bureaucracy in our relationship.
- Recognising that decisions are best taken and services are best delivered as close to the citizen as possible, a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach also requires closer partnerships with voluntary and community organisations and the private sector.
- With local government at the table, successful delivery of these missions is possible only through a shared agreement to lead with “purpose and govern in partnership”.

3. Councils as custodians of place


- Local government has a critical role in transforming local places through a unique understanding of where local challenges and opportunities are to be identified.
 - A blueprint for a better tomorrow in Our Plan can only materialise by harnessing the place-shaping potential of local government.
 - As custodians of place, devolving powers to local government can enable councils to harness the momentum of efficiency and effectiveness following the 2015 reforms.
 - Delivering long term well-being outcomes requires a critical review of the current services local government delivers and the powers local government can draw on to deliver those services.
 - Recognising the long-term focus of Our Plan, a commitment should be made to delivering early intervention and prevention into local areas from a mindset and recognition of the value of localism.
- 

Guiding principles to empower local government

4. Sustainably resourcing missions

- We know demand is outstripping supply in public services and current financial pressures pose “a significant challenge to sustainable service delivery by councils.”
- Local government cannot deliver the ambition of this Programme for Government without greater fiscal discretion to deliver these missions. 2022-23 saw the largest shortfall between income and expenditure that has been recorded since the new council structure was established in 2015-16.
- There is an opportunity to match the signals from the United Kingdom Government on the benefit of multi-year financial settlements and outcomes-based frameworks which act to empower local government.
- Any package of devolved functions to councils should be based on the principle that any new responsibility or power transferred from central government should be fully funded sustainably for the long term.
- We cannot achieve the vision of the Programme for Government without appropriate powers and resources to respond to and help unlock the potential of our communities.

5. Whole-systems accountability

- The wellbeing dashboard is a welcome first step. However, there is an opportunity to harness the wealth of local data at the council level for evidence-based policy-making.
 - Moving beyond a zero-sum mindset for implementation requires annual reporting to recognise a whole-of-government accountability framework.
 - Quantitative measurement and analysis alone will not unmask the challenges in delivery. Greater participatory and citizen-focused techniques are key to driving outcomes and a commitment to tackling unnecessary bureaucracy.
 - How we use data requires greater comparative benchmarking and there is an opportunity to harness the “can opener” to drive performance improvement.
- 

Concluding remarks

A successful Programme for Government will be grounded in local foundations.

Governments across these islands are waking up and recognising that true delivery and transformation cannot happen without unlocking the full potential of local government. We face a rare opportunity to achieve a degree of partnership and strategic alignment like never before. Guided by this shared conviction, we can translate visions into outcomes for the communities we serve.

Our track record of agility and delivery in the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the opportunity cost of not empowering local government.

NILGA is the voice of local government in Northern Ireland. However, we cannot deliver for our communities without unleashing the collective power of central and local government, other public bodies, the private sector and the voluntary and community sector.

We stand ready to make this Programme for Government a reality and look forward to engaging meaningfully with the NI Executive on how local government can make its contribution to the delivery of the missions and a better tomorrow.

Disclaimer: The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) endeavours to ensure that the information contained within our Website, Policies and other communications is up to date and correct. We do not, however, make any representation that the information will be accurate, current, complete, uninterrupted or error free or that any information or other material accessible from or related to NILGA is free of viruses or other harmful components. NILGA accepts no responsibility for any erroneous information placed by or on behalf of any user or any loss by any person or user resulting from such information.

NILGA
Bradford Court, Upper Galwally, Castlereagh, BT8 6RB

web: www.nilga.org

 [@NILGA](https://twitter.com/NILGA)

 [Northern Ireland Local Government Association](https://www.linkedin.com/company/nilga)