

NILGA Leadership Development Programme for Councillors 2026

What is this programme about?

The NILGA Leadership Development Programme provides a unique training and development experience for councillors in Northern Ireland to help them address the challenges of their role.

The programme is based on a tested and highly accessible model, which helps councillors to improve their understanding of:

- *Context*: how to adapt their leadership styles and practices to the context and challenges of their own place, people and systems.
- *Theory*: what knowledge, skills and capabilities they need to be effective, based on rigorous conceptual and theoretical frameworks.
- *Practice*: how to increase their personal resilience and improve their practical response to challenges.

The programme therefore enhances councillors' strategic leadership and decision-making skills, making more effective their Council role, community champion activities and 'personal brand'.

How will this programme benefit me?

The programme will help you to develop the practical skills necessary to be a more effective councillor, to highlight what roles you currently play and should look to play in the future, and to overcome the major challenges and barriers you face in playing these roles.

You will have the chance to catch up with the latest thinking on local government leadership and to develop new approaches to your work as a councillor.

The Programme is deliberately ambitious – it aims to enable you to take a strategic approach to identifying, balancing and addressing the needs in your local area and making more effective use of the assets of local residents, community groups, local business, your political party (if you belong to one) and the Council.

The programme is also designed to help you to deal successfully with the operational problems faced by your constituents. Case studies and discussions with visiting speakers who have directly relevant experience of the issues will introduce new approaches, so that you are assisted to think and act differently and have more impact in tackling the problems you face.

Finally, the programme is CPD-accredited, so upon completion you will accumulate CPD credits to demonstrate your achievement.

Programme of workshops

Modules
Module 1: Programme Induction The Role of the Councillor
Module 2: Leadership of Your Area
Module 3: Leadership of Your Community
Module 4: Leadership with Partners – We're All in This Together
Module 5: Leadership of Place
Module 6: Leading the Improvement of Outcomes
Module 7: Leading the Improvement of Efficiency and Service Delivery
Module 8: Developing Your Future Leadership Role

During the eight modules, we will be exploring the following knowledge and skill sets – and you will have a chance to identify your own strengths and ‘learning opportunities’ in relation to each of these:

- Local leadership (All Modules)
- Political understanding (Modules 1, 2 and 5)
- Partnership working (Modules 3 ,4 and 5)
- Effective communication for influence (Module 3 and 7)
- Scrutiny and challenge (Module 2 and 6)
- Regulating and monitoring (Module 6)
- Effective use of digital technologies and social media (Module 7)
- Personal resilience (Module 8)

What commitment will the programme entail from me?

You will be expected to attend eight 3-hour workshops over 8 months, beginning 23rd January 2026, preparation is required for each workshop (reading a short article or blog and preparing the answer to some questions relevant to the session). You will then gain CPD credits for your

attendance. In addition, you will get 12 extra CPD credits if you make a short presentation in one of the final workshops, focusing on how you are improving your leadership in line with the lessons you have learnt from the programme.

What other participants have gained

NILGA believes this programme brings major benefits for all participants. And previous participants agree here are some comments from councillors who participated in previous programmes:

“The programme has been brilliant from start to finish, I have learnt a lot from it and from that learning I can actually make better decisions and get more involved in my role as a Councillor as I no longer shy away from the big decisions.”

“The use of data sources and the approach of identifying key skills in people where I do not have the strength in such. Also, the continual developing and learning in myself has been a great asset in both council and my professional role.”

“I found the course informative, and it helped me to understand my role as a Councillor and leader in my community. It was also really good to hear experiences and tips from Councillors in other areas.”

“... pushed me to make me even more self-aware ..., especially of my leadership style and how best to utilise this in different groups and situations. Particularly the power of influence and not control!”

“As a newly elected councillor I am still very much learning in the role. Content in the Programme helped me gain a better understanding of process and how to achieve outcomes.”

Costing Estimate

The cost for the overall Programme, based on 2023-24 delivery and current forecasted requirements, is approximately £14,600 +VAT. Individual participant cost will be subject to the overall number of the cohort nominated for the Leadership Programme 2023-24; based on a cohort of 20, we can provide an indicative cost of £730 +VAT.

There will be an opportunity for those Councillors who are interested in and committed to achieving CPD accreditation from the CPD Standards Office. This will involve additional costs to the figure provided above - indicative costs at this stage are a further £590 +VAT. Those who wish to register and commit to CPD accreditation will have a deadline within which to do so (typically, at the end of the second module).



NILGA Leadership Programme for Elected Members 2026

September 2026

Overview and approach to modules

Effective councillors can help to change the world – or at least their part of it. However, it doesn't get any easier for a councillor to be effective – the challenges of financial austerity, cost of living increases, an ageing population, high inequality, climate change, local unemployment, contentious planning applications and problems with many local public services mean that the job is today even more demanding than ever before. The COVID-19 crisis has also shown the local councillors need to be effective crisis managers and help local organisations and communities to become more resilient.

The NILGA Leadership Programme provides a unique training and development experience for councillors in Northern Ireland - to help them address these challenges. It gives them the opportunity to develop and improve their strategic knowledge, leadership skills and decision-making capabilities, and to enhance their corporate role and 'personal brand', so that they can act as effective community champions and change agents on behalf of their local areas.

In particular, this Programme aims to develop the practical skills necessary for a strategic understanding of the context within which councillors work (people, place and systems) and the capabilities they need, using relevant models and concepts to help them improve their strategic leadership approach in a local political environment.

The modules, which are all tailored to the Northern Ireland context, are grounded in a practical understanding of the roles of councillors and the challenges and barriers they face in playing these roles. They help participants to develop new ways of thinking and to draw upon new ideas that will enhance their personal effectiveness and their impact as representatives of their local area.

The Leadership Programme is therefore based on a three-dimensional approach which is tested and accessible to all councillors – the Context, Theory and Practice Model:

- *Context*: understanding of the *context and challenges* (place, people and systems)
- *Theory*: rigorous *conceptual and theoretical frameworks* which give councillors the knowledge, skills and capabilities they need; and
- *Practice*: understanding how to enhance *personal resilience and practical responses* to the challenges.

Moreover, previous participants have commented on how participation in the NILGA Leadership Programme has provided them with the opportunity to develop new networks which they believe will be very valuable beyond the training programme.

1. Context and Challenges

The Programme will focus on developing participants' understanding of the context within which they undertake their unique and demanding roles. Participants will therefore be asked to map out what they know already and identify what their learning needs might be. This will be done within each of the themes of *Place, People and Systems*, identifying what they know and how they can go about getting more knowledge on the key issues. It will of course build upon and utilise existing work that a councillor may have engaged in in his/her other roles, the local authority or with NILGA.

2. Conceptual and theoretical frameworks

At all stages of the Programme, participants will have the chance to consider relevant theoretical models and conceptual frameworks which help them to understand better their local context and real, everyday challenges. This will enable participants to make effective use of theories for identifying and

implementing new solutions. All theoretical and conceptual frameworks will be summarised in short slide presentations, backed up by practical readings, and illustrated by relevant case studies from the UK and internationally. Moreover, group work will encourage participants to put the discussed theories into practice and share the lessons learnt.

3. Practice

The focus of the Leadership Programme is on enabling the participants to put the learning into practice in their own context. Throughout the Programme, innovative case studies will be used to throw light on alternative ways of understanding the real practical issues that councillors are expected to address. The purpose will be to help Councillors to transfer innovative practice to their own context and design tailored solutions to the challenges they face.

As well as investigating practical ways in which councillors can contribute to improving public services and quality of life in their areas, the Programme will help them to explore how they can enhance their own impact and their personal brand. Furthermore, the CPD accreditation is particularly valuable in demonstrating that participants have developed their leadership skills for the council's benefit.

Broader approach

The Programme is deliberately ambitious - it aims to enable local elected members to take a strategic approach to identifying, balancing and addressing the needs in their local area and making more effective use of the assets of local residents, community groups, local businesses, their political party (if they belong to one) and the Council.

The Programme is also designed to help councillors to deal successfully with the operational problems faced by their constituents. Case studies and discussions with visiting speakers who have directly relevant experience of the issues will introduce new approaches, so that councillors are assisted to think and act differently and have more impact in addressing the problems they face.

Assignment for Accreditation

Accreditation is awarded through the CPD Standards Office, a high reputation accreditation organisation in the field of continuous professional development.

Accreditation consists of either 24 hours or 36 hours of CPD credit, reflecting whether or not the participant has undertaken the assignments in the programme.

Whilst accreditation itself is optional, the tailored assignments have been specifically designed to underpin the approach to learning, based on the Context, Theory and Practice Model.

The assignments for the Leadership Programme will involve demonstrating how the learning has been contextualised and applied in terms of the leadership challenges that "21st Century Councillors" face in their councils.

At the end of each module, participants will discuss in small groups their learning from that module and how it will potentially fit into the assignments, with the opportunity to explore their ideas with the facilitators. Advice and support on preparing presentations will also be provided through email and/or by telephone/video conference calls.

Assignment One: Presentation on the participant's role in leadership

This assignment will involve councillors preparing and presenting a 15–20-minute presentation around the themes of leadership. In the presentation, councillors will analyse their own specific roles, using relevant models and tools from the programme, and then apply these to explore ways in which they themselves, their party (if relevant) and the council could in future tackle more effectively the challenges they face. As well as having advice and support in preparation, they will afterwards receive constructive comments on their oral presentation and the slides or other visual aids (such as video clips) which they use.

Assignment Two: Completion of a Learning Journal

This assignment will require each participant to keep a Learning Journal, in which they will summarise after each module the key points from the reading done and the discussions in the module, ending with a short summary of the practical lessons which the participant has learned from that module. Participants will be asked to provide drafts during the programme and feedback will be provided on a regular basis.

Module 1 – Programme Induction

The Roles of the Councillor

Date: 23rd January 2026, tbc

Delivered by: Tony Bovaird and Elke Loeffler

Content: An introductory module that will cover accreditation, induction and set the scene

Introduction to the Leadership Programme and the facilitators

- Overview of the Leadership Programme aims and content.
- Exploration of the participants' own objectives, and how the Leadership Programme content will be tailored to meet their needs.
- Discussion of how individuals can organise the time needed for the Leadership Programme, including completing the assignments, and getting "buy-in" from their council.

Introduction to accreditation and assignment approach

- Understanding of the learning and assignment objectives.

Helping councillors to understand and build on their own existing knowledge and skills sets using the following tools, (including some self-assessment in advance, using at least one of these tools):

- Local Government Association (2013): Political Skills Framework
- University of Birmingham (2016): The 21st Century Councillor Research
- Final Report of the De Montfort Journal Councillor Commission (2017): The voice of the Councillor
- NILGA Councillor Guide 2019

"What I've learned about developing my role as a councillor" - Contribution from a peer councillor (tbc) who previously participated in the programme.

Learning Outcomes

- Better understanding of the diversity of the role and the demands that are placed on councillors in terms of directing and balancing the needs of the local area, residents and voters, community groups, local businesses, your political party (if a member) and the council.
- Clearer understanding by each participant of their own learning needs, in terms of knowledge, skills and capabilities that should be improved.
- Development of confidence in using both personal reflection and course learning materials to analyse and enhance personal leadership.

Module 2 - Leadership of Your Local Area

Date: February 2026 tbc

Delivered by: Tony Bovaird and Alan Mitchell (Data Scientist Fermanagh & Omagh Council)

Content: Understanding your place and the people in your place

Key concepts:

- Demographic characteristics of local people
- Local needs and priorities
- Accessing data and analysis

Discussion of data available and analysis possibilities around the following:

- Council boundary, DEA and Ward, your bigger council area - how well do you know your place?
- The needs of the local area, what they are and how to find out?
- What assets does your local area have?
- Who are your residents / constituents?
- How do you categorise the people that come to you for advice?
- Who most needs help – how to establish priorities?
- What outcomes do your local residents most want to see improved in the local area (especially on the part of those you most want to help)?

Getting councillors to understand and build on their own existing knowledge and skills sets using the following tools:

- Demographics and socio-economic identity
- DEA and Ward Profiles (sub-classifications within profiles)
- Data and evidence (Community Planning)

Learning outcomes

- Participants will be better able to identify the needs and characteristics of the people they represent.
- Participants will know how to access data relevant to the area and people they represent and will understand the range of analyses which can be undertaken with this data.

Module 3 - Leadership of Your Local Community

Date: March 2026 tbc

Delivered by: Tony Bovaird and Elke Loeffler

Content: Understanding the assets and capabilities of the people in your place and how you can harness these to improve public services and outcomes

Key concepts:

- User- and community-centred public services
- Assets and capabilities of service users and members of communities
- Co-production of public services and outcomes
- Co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, co-assessment

Discussion of how co-production can contribute to the outcomes of public service organisations by means of:

- Identifying the strengths, capabilities and resources of service users
- Identifying the assets available in the citizens and civil society organisations in local communities
- Prioritising co-production initiatives which improve public services and priority outcomes
- Overcoming the barriers to co-production at organisational and community levels

Getting councillors to build on their existing knowledge and skills sets using the following tools:

- Community asset mapping (Scottish Place Standard)
- See What You Can Do Toolkit (Governance International)
- Dimensions of Outcomes (Governance International)

Learning outcomes

- Participants will know how to map the assets and capabilities of service users and the people in the communities they represent.
- Participants will understand their role in mobilising service users and community members to achieve better public outcomes.
- Participants will understand better how to influence the council and other public service organisations to become more user-oriented and community-oriented in their work.

Module 4: Leadership with Partners – We're all in this Together

Date: April 2026 tbc

Delivered by Tony Bovaird, Elke Loeffler and Partner Representatives

Content: Councillors operate in a shifting complex environment, faced with new problems and demands which require innovative solutions, achieved through influence and persuasion of partners and other stakeholders

Key concepts

- Leadership styles inside and across organisations
- Collaboration and partnership working
- Complex systems and wicked problems

Initial discussion and consideration around the following:

- Councillors have to operate in a complex and constantly changing world.
- Behaviour change is essential within the council, its partner organisations (including government) and service providers (including private and third sector organisations).
- Elected members cannot control or command these changes – but they can use their influence to change policy, strategy, service operations and citizen behaviour.

This module explores how councillors can influence better collaborative working through:

- Analysing, diagnosing and responding to emerging challenges
- Dealing with complex systems (Cynefin)
- Tackling wicked problems (Grint, Head and Alford)
- Collaborative working – collaborative gain, types of partnership, mobilising partners
- Adopting the appropriate leadership style for different contexts
- Using influence, not control

There will also be contributions from partner organisations of local councils about their experience across the themes covered in this module.

Learning outcomes:

- Understanding how to adapt leadership style to different challenges and contexts working with stakeholders inside and outside the council.
- Understanding how to attract, mobilise and get the best out of potential partners (in the public, private and third sectors and in the community).
- Understanding how councillors can enhance decision making in complex systems by ensuring their unique inputs get heard alongside those of others involved in decisions.

Module 5: Leadership of Place

Date: May 2026 tbc

Delivered by: Dr Gavan Rafferty and Tony Bovaird

Content: Council's strategic leadership role in place shaping - coordinating how places are governed and managed

Key concepts:

- Place shaping
- Leadership of place through community planning
- Development and regeneration planning

Initial discussion and consideration around the following:

International and national trends, particularly around technological change, concerns with local environment and the differing nature of public service needs across communities indicate how local authorities, play a key role in shaping their local places and communities.

Engaging with place shaping functions in the council requires understanding of:

- The Regional Strategic Landscape
- Local Development Planning
- Community Planning
- Regeneration
- Enterprise and local economic development

Getting councillors to build on their existing knowledge and skills sets using the following tools:

- NILGA Councillor Guide 2019
- Place based leadership (Robin Hambleton model)

Learning outcomes:

- Understanding the statutory framework influencing the development of local areas.
- Confidence in being able to support the council to make appropriate development decisions, while also being able to challenge inappropriate decisions.
- Skills in advising local people how to play their part in the development and community planning processes (including make complaints and other representations).

Module 6: Leading the Improvement of Outcomes

Date: June 2026 tbc

Delivered by Tony Bovaird and Elke Loeffler

Content: As democratically elected local representatives, councillors are in a unique and privileged position to make a real difference to people's lives, but they need to understand how council policies and services affect the outcomes that matter to local people.

Key concepts:

- The inputs-processes-outcomes model for evaluating public services and policies.
- Assessing achievement of public value
- Constructing pathways to outcomes
- Public governance principles to ensure council decisions contribute positively to local public services and community activities

Initial discussion and consideration around the following:

This module will focus on how councillors play a key role both in setting the framework for what the council is trying to achieve (particularly the quality of life outcomes achieved by residents) and also in monitoring the actual service delivery experienced by service users. It will help councillors to develop skills in analysing the ways in which the council affects outcomes and prioritising between the different available pathways.

Helping councillors to develop skills sets using the following tools:

- Public value model (Governance International)
- Pathways to outcomes methodology
- Local governance evaluation model (Governance International)

Learning outcomes:

- Understanding how policies, services and other interventions by councils and other public sector agencies are linked to outcomes experienced by service users and communities.
- Understanding how councillors can enhance decision making in complex systems by ensuring their unique inputs get heard alongside those of others involved in decisions.

Module 7: Leading the Improvement of Efficiency and Service Delivery

Date: July 2026 tbc

Delivered by Tony Bovaird and Elke Loeffler

Key concepts:

- Efficiency through economies of scale, economies of scope, innovation and learning
- Effective commissioning, procurement, contracting and service delivery

Initial discussion and consideration around the following:

The previous module focussed on how councillors play a key role in both setting the framework for what council is trying to achieve and also monitoring the actual outcomes being experienced by service users. In this module we turn to the skills which councillors need both to influence commissioning decisions (and the procurement and contracting decisions which flow from commissioning) and also to scrutinise the efficiency and quality of service delivery and influence the service improvement process.

In particular, councillors need to scrutinise the value for money of council activities, with an understanding of the rules, constraints and opportunities facing the council. This module will enable councillors to understand how different approaches to procurement and contracting can help to achieve higher efficiency and, where appropriate, more commercial approaches to service delivery, with a focus on achieving economies of scale, scope and learning.

Helping councillors to develop skills sets using the following tools:

- Pros and cons of outsourcing and insourcing
- Testing economies of scale, scope and learning
- Linking the commissioning, procurement and purchasing cycles
- Scrutiny and challenge checklist

Learning outcomes

- Understanding the key factors involved in commissioning through internal and external service providers.
- Understanding different strategies for achieving efficiency (through larger scale, more joined-up activities, or innovation and learning).
- Understanding how councillors can influence commissioning, procurement, contracting and service delivery decisions in ways which will improve outcomes and efficiency.

Module 8: Developing Your Future Leadership Role

Date: August 2026 tbc

Delivered by: Tony Bovaird and Elke Loeffler

Content: One of the reasons a citizen becomes a councillor is because they care about their local area and the people who live there. There is a huge variety of ways in which councillors can make a difference, but they cannot play all roles all the time – they need to prioritise and to protect their own time and to deal with the stresses and emotional demands of the role.

Key concepts:

- 21st Century Councillor (adapted from University of Birmingham 2016)
- The digital councillor
- Coping with challenges – building supportive relationships, resilience in the face of stress

This module focuses on helping councillors to shape their own leadership approach, using the learning that has been acquired on the programme. It will help them develop and/or improve their own personal development plans, raising their aspirations and planning the practical steps they need to take to put these aspirations into practice.

In particular, the module will consider what is involved in each of the roles required from the 21st Century Councillor: steward of place; advocate; buffer; sense maker; catalyst; entrepreneur; crisis manager; and orchestrator.

Recognising that no one person can play all these roles simultaneously, the module will help participants to identify what balance of these roles they want to play in the future, using the learning from the Programme, together with case studies and reflection on their own practice.

Finally, the module will consider how councillors can cope at a personal level with the stress and emotional demands involved in addressing the complex and often uncomfortable challenges which face them in their leadership roles.

Learning outcomes:

- Better understanding of the diversity of the councillor's role and the demands it makes in terms of directing and balancing the needs of the local area, residents and voters, community groups, local businesses, your political party (if a member) and the council.
- Deciding a new balance of leadership roles which the councillor wants to play in future.
- Design of a further learning programme by each participant, including specific experiences, training and skills development, e.g. use of digital technologies, which will enable the councillor to be effective in these rebalanced leadership roles.
- Increased confidence that, as a councillor, the participant will be able to cope with the stress and emotional demands of community and organisational leadership.