

Dear Planning Committee Chair

On behalf of NILGA, we are writing to thank you for your participation in the recent Ministerial Led Planning Engagement Forum with the Minister for Infrastructure, Liz Kimmins MLA, on 18 June 2026.

As you will be aware, this engagement followed NILGA's previous correspondence and discussions with the Department for Infrastructure regarding Planning Improvement. In particular, NILGA has consistently emphasised that elected member learning, engagement and support must be a key part of the Planning Improvement Programme, recognising the central role of councillors in local democratic decision-making and in the effective operation of the planning system.

We are pleased to share the attached note, summarising the discussions, points of agreement, and actions from the Forum. The meeting provided an important opportunity for Planning Committee Chairs, NILGA and the Minister to consider the challenges facing the planning system and the changes required to deliver a system that empowers councils, supports communities and enables sustainable growth.

The discussion identified substantial common ground on the need for change, including around policy alignment, rural and economic impact, infrastructure constraints, operational performance, regional call-ins and the importance of a stronger whole-system approach. The Minister acknowledged the issues raised and committed to action across a number of areas.

Of particular importance for NILGA and local government is the recognition that planning improvement cannot be delivered through process or system reform alone. Elected members must be meaningfully engaged and properly supported in carrying out their planning responsibilities. The outcome note therefore records that NILGA will draft proposals to support and empower elected members in their planning decision-making responsibilities, alongside continued engagement with the Department, DAERA, NI Water and other relevant partners.

As the representative voice of local government, NILGA remains committed to working constructively with Planning Committee Chairs, councils, the Department and wider stakeholders to ensure that planning reform reflects local democratic accountability and

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equips elected members with the knowledge, confidence and support required to fulfil their statutory roles effectively.

We would encourage you to share the attached outcome note with members of your Planning Committee and relevant officers. NILGA will continue to keep councils informed as this work progresses and will bring forward proposals on elected member learning, development and engagement as part of the wider Planning Improvement agenda.

Thank you again for your support and constructive contribution to this important work.

Yours faithfully,



Ald Hazel Legge
President (UUP)



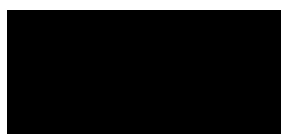
Cllr Matt Garrett
Vice-President (Sinn Fein)



Cllr Alison Bennington
Vice-President (DUP)



Cllr Billy Webb, MBE JP
Vice-President (All)



Cllr Carl Whyte
Vice-President (SDLP)

Ministerial Led Planning Engagement Forum with Minister Liz Kimmins

Executive Summary

Following engagement between NILGA and the Department for Infrastructure to ensure the views of elected members were considered in Planning Improvement work, the inaugural Ministerial Led Planning Engagement Forum took place on 18 June 2026. Discussion focused on the need for a planning system that empowers councils, supports communities & enables sustainable growth. The Forum identified clear common ground on the challenges facing the planning system, including policy alignment, rural & economic impact, infrastructure constraints, operational performance, regional call-ins, and the need for a stronger whole-system approach. The Minister acknowledged these issues and committed to action across a number of areas.

Local Government's Ask

Local Government is asking for a planning system that empowers councils, supports communities & enables sustainable growth.

Issue	Ask
Align Policy and Decision-Making	Ensure the SPPS, RDS and Local Plans work together and reflect local needs.
Support Rural Towns, Villages and Housing	Enable proportionate policies that support rural development and protect social & economic wellbeing.
Align Policy with Investment	Resolve infrastructure constraints, especially NI Water capacity, so development and plans can be delivered.
Improve System Performance	Enforce statutory consultee timeframes and remove delays in plan-making & decisions.
Clarify Regional Call-Ins	Set clear criteria, thresholds & timelines for call-ins and ensure adequate resourcing.
Champion Placemaking and Quality	Promote high quality design and place-based outcomes in every community.
Adopt Whole-System Thinking	Take a coordinated, cross-departmental approach with elected member engagement at the heart.

Common Ground

There was agreement between the local government representatives and the Minister on the challenges and the need for change.

Issue	Details
Policy Alignment	A scoping exercise of the SPPS and RDS is underway to consider how regional policy better supports local decision-making. Greater input from elected members is essential.
Rural and Economic Impact	Planning decisions must support rural vitality and safeguard the social and economic wellbeing of communities.
Infrastructure Constraints	NI Water capacity and other infrastructure constraints are delaying development and risk delivery of Local Development Plans. Solutions such as developer contributions and sustainable drainage are being explored, but funding remains insufficient.
Operational Performance	Timeframes for statutory consultees are a major issue. The Planning Improvement Programme is progressing validation checklists, standardised protocols and improved engagement to boost performance and consistency.
Regional Call-Ins	Lack of clear criteria and timelines is a key concern. The Department is reviewing regulations, thresholds and resourcing.
Whole-System Approach	Better cross-departmental coordination and joint engagement with Ministers and councils will support smarter, collaborative decision-making.

Ministerial Commitments

The Minister acknowledged the issues raised and committed to action.

Issue	Commitment
Planning System Review	A scoping exercise of the SPPS and RDS is underway to shape the future of regional and strategic planning policy.
Planning Improvement Programme	A programme of short-, medium- and long-term changes is in train to improve performance across the system.
Elected Member Engagement	There is a commitment to greater input from elected members in shaping the planning system.
Infrastructure Engagement	There will be ongoing engagement with NI Water to address capacity constraints and explore practical solutions.
Cross-Departmental Working	There is a willingness to engage further with Minister Muir and DAERA, with potential for a joint forum.
Stronger Whole-System Approach	There is recognition that a coordinated, cross-departmental approach is essential for better, faster outcomes.

Why This Matters

Effective planning is fundamental to stronger councils, thriving communities and sustainable economic growth. A system that is clear, responsive and properly aligned empowers local democracy, builds public trust, gives investors and communities greater certainty, protects the vitality of rural towns and villages, and supports the delivery of quality homes and places. By improving performance, transparency and whole-system coordination, planning can move from being a source of delay and frustration to a practical driver of better outcomes for people, places and future generations.

Next Steps

- NILGA will draft proposals to support and empower elected members in their planning decision-making responsibilities.
- Continue engagement with Minister Muir, DAERA and NI Water. Explore a joint forum.
- Complete scoping of SPPS and RDS and consider options for future legislation and clearer call-in rules.
- Sustain whole-system working and keep councils informed and involved at every stage.

Better Planning. Stronger Councils. Thriving Communities.

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