

A PROGRAMME FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT 2016 – 2021 & BEYOND



Strangford Lough



Old Courthouse, Antrim



The Gobbins, Larne

**STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY,
SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES**

nilga
northern ireland
local government association

INTRODUCTION

As the new Programme for Government emerges, it's worth noting that 11 new councils with new powers came into being in April 2015.

These new councils are designed to deliver and challenge for better outcomes for local people - the hub of communities, a partner of equals in government, innovators.

In any contemporary, citizen centred democracy, councils are both a champion of local community needs and an astute forward planner – a key provider to those who need public services today, and a sustainable investment champion for the next generation, wherever we live, work, or visit.

NILGA, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, wants the Programme for Government during this Assembly mandate to be co-designed and co-delivered by councils, in a manner which sees, over time, greater responsibilities and powers exercised by local government, together with the requisite resources transferred to and deployed by them, to provide world class, affordable services and representation.

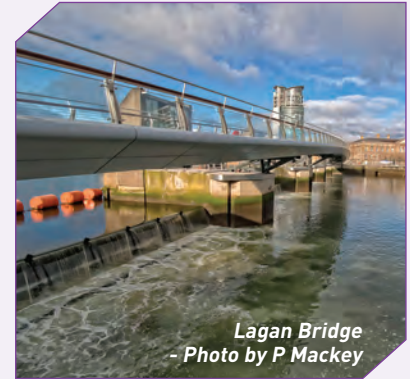
This attached Programme for Local Government, driven by substantial, inclusive input from councils themselves and their many partners, provides the means to strengthen democracy and sustain our diverse communities in NI.



Context

Local authorities have a unique chance to work collectively as a sector to improve the governance, economy and quality of public services for our ratepayers and our citizens.

The new Programme for Government has set out the plans and priorities for Northern Ireland as a region for the 2016-2021 Assembly mandate. The Northern Ireland Executive should not ignore the significant role that councils and local communities can play in the future successes of Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is imperative that a strategic alignment is established and maintained between the Executive's Programme for Government and the 11 council Community Plans.



NILGA, in conjunction with the 11 new councils, was tasked with developing a Programme for Local Government 2016 – 2021, setting out why and how the two spheres of government can and should work together, with shared goals and a collective purpose – whilst ensuring that councils quite clearly retain their autonomy.

In September 2015, NILGA issued a consultation on proposals for a Programme for Local Government. A copy of the consultation document and the summary of responses can be accessed from the NILGA website.

Overall, responses to the consultation were very positive and supportive of NILGA's proposals, with the caveats that we take our time, get the evidence-base established and ensure that proper resources will transfer.

The following sections of this document summarise the agreed guiding principles and priorities for local government from 2016 – 2026 (two Assembly mandates).

Guiding Principles

The following Guiding Principles are put forward as the basis for developing a Programme for Local Government:

- **Collaborative working and joint accountability**
The relationship between regional and local government is based on mutual respect and partnership
- **Sustainable finance and investment**
Financial decisions are taken sub-regionally/ locally through a council-led community planning approach
- **Simplified regulation, audit and bureaucracy**
Greater accountability and integration, with more customer-aligned services
- **Community Planning**
Local needs/ identified priorities aligned with government targets
- **Public Sector Improvement**
Two-tier delivery platform for public sector services and their improvement
- **Protection of local democracy**
Political and administrative commitment to the principles of the Charter of Local Self-Government
- **Strengthening local democracy**
Uniting and profiling local government, putting local democracy at the heart of our future
- **Strong councils and councillors**
Both spheres of government to be equal and empowered
- **Hard work with clear intent**
To develop understanding and support for democracy

- **Outward-looking and Innovative**
Building on best practice, solution-focused and responsive, utilising new technology
- **Ensuring probity and good conduct**
Assessing, and when necessary campaigning to improve, the Northern Ireland **Code of Conduct** for Councillors, ensuring simple, effective and universal awareness of/ adherence to the Principles of Public Life underpinning the Code.





Drumaheglis
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DEVOLUTION OF POWERS

The additional powers that were transferred to local government through the local government reform are, on the whole, welcomed by local government on the basis that they reflect the role of local councils as place-shapers and local leaders within their communities. The presumption therefore should be towards moving more powers to local councils, along with appropriate resources.

NILGA recognises that there needs to be further engagement with the local government sector and other stakeholders to identify those responsibilities which would be of most impact to communities, if transferred.

Furthermore, local government requires a critical review of the functions and new powers transferred to date, particularly within the context of the resource allocation which accompanied them.

Immediate emphasis (2016/17) will be put on securing the transfer of regeneration powers.

In the next Assembly mandate (2016-2021) and beyond, NILGA, in conjunction with the 11 councils, will develop an evidence base (including associated costs) to debate and if appropriate build business cases to transfer the following powers from central to local government:

- **National, European and transnational programmes for investment in infrastructure**
- **Local roads and transport, including planning of local bus and ferry services and on-street car parking**
- **Maintenance of the public realm**
- **Economic development including co-ordinating skills development**
- **The built environment with an enhanced policy and influencing role on housing**
- **Libraries, arts, culture and sport**
- **Environmental services, including conservation of natural and built heritage**
- **Fishery harbours**
- **Other services carried out in partnership with or on behalf of departments and other bodies e.g. certain health promotion and protection functions**



Specific Asks

In the next Assembly mandate (2016 – 2021) and the following mandate (2021 – 2026) NILGA will work with local councils and other stakeholders to build business cases and (depending on the outcome of each business case) subsequently lobby for the following ‘specific asks’:

1. A **power to enable** effective **pooling of budgets** by departments, public bodies and councils to facilitate the implementation of community plans and the achievement of agreed outcomes.
2. To explore **greater fiscal flexibility for councils** – including seeking a commitment from all departments to engage with councils on a sector-wide basis as well as departmental level, using a “New Burdens” approach prior to making financial decisions that have an impact on council budgets.
3. To lobby the Northern Ireland Executive for a **transformation fund** for local government, similar to the transformation fund provided to the outgoing Northern Ireland Executive Departments and to the Health and Social Care Sector.
4. A new **Civil Contingencies Bill**, recognising the local co-ordination role of councils in emergency planning activity; and ring-fencing funding for emergency planning and climate adaptation measures.
5. Commitment from the Department of Finance to work with Treasury to **return ‘ring fenced’ Landfill Tax revenue directly to Northern Ireland councils** for investment in waste management infrastructure.
6. To devolve powers and funding for **skills and employment support** to councils, in partnership with higher education colleges to accompany the devolution of local economic development and regeneration, so that investment decisions can be based directly on what local economies and local businesses need in terms of future and present workforces to create jobs;
7. To give councils in Northern Ireland **traffic management powers** similar to Wales and other regions.
8. To strengthen the leadership, representational and commissioning roles of councillors:
 - by including an elected member from each council on the Board of the new **Education Authority**;
 - ensuring that the Boards of Arms-Length Bodies (e.g. the **Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service, NIHE**) delivering services provided by local government elsewhere, include an appropriate, politically balanced number of councillors.
9. To develop an agreed, **shared**, cross-governmental, outcome-focused **performance management and improvement** system – with a single Code of Conduct - so that we can improve together.
10. To develop a new **Northern Ireland Policy & Investment Forum**, led by a principal department and the Executive Office on behalf of regional government, and co-ordinated through NILGA within local government, to optimise knowledge & investment of Structural & Non-Structural Funds available through the EU & other investors.



CONCLUSION

NILGA has developed this Programme and aims to deliver it through the explicit leadership of councils, government more widely and many of their partners at regional level.

Government must always have an eye on the future despite the relative shortness of mandates. Strengthening democracy and developing sustainable communities are not time bound initiatives; therefore the Association has done its level best to balance aspiration with pragmatism.



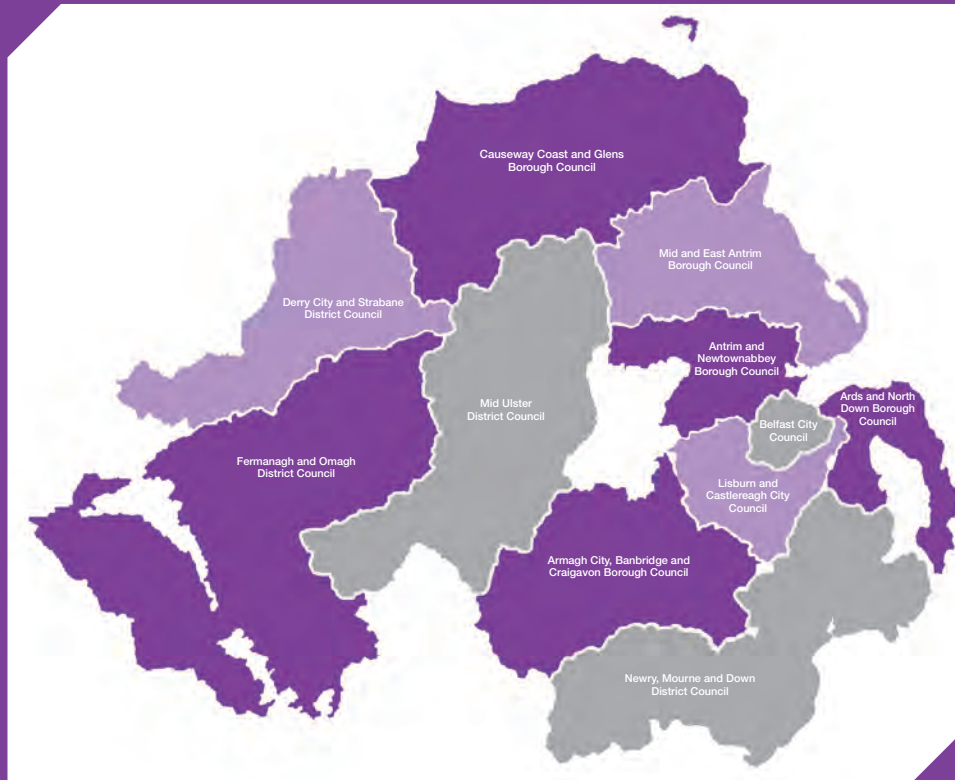
Over the next decade, it is imperative that NI's local councils make the case to government and the public that they are not only the hub of local communities, but are a confident, resourced, essential and growing part of sustainable democracy and world-class public service provision, locally, regionally, nationally and beyond. NILGA believes that this will and must happen, for any Programme for Government to be truly citizen-centred.

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