

Consultation on Developing a Programme for Local Government 2016-2020' Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the above consultation and wishes to raise the following issues:

1. Devolution of powers and functions such as these to councils is happening in neighbouring jurisdictions and across Europe. Is this something we should be exploring?

NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to the list of suggested 'potential enhanced responsibilities' outlined above. Are there any other functions that we should consider discussing? Are there any of the functions listed above that you feel are not suitable to be devolved to local councils?

Response: Council is supportive of the notion that local government should always be responsive to the needs of local people and the communities which it serves and as such is open minded to receiving new powers and functions which facilitates the provision of accessible services at the point of delivery. Local government is a democratically accountable way of meeting local challenges. Empowering local government to focus on local challenges gives citizens a democratic route to respond to the problems being faced. Agreement, however, to receive new powers and functions should be taken in the context of the period of reform which Councils have recently gone through, and the time it will take for new local authorities to bed in within their new districts.

Council believes that all the responsibilities listed as 'potential enhanced responsibilities' should be considered at this stage but the sector should be reflective and realistic on what it can take responsibility for. Whilst it is admirable to assume responsibility for delivering services at the lowest level possible the Council believes that the local government sector should work to ensure that local authorities do not become arms length bodies of central government, being viewed as delivering services within their prescribed terms with little local influence on how services are actually delivered.

Significant engagement would be required to:

- (i) Identify those responsibilities which would be of most impact to communities if local government secured influence in delivering same;
- (ii) Secure adequate resources year on year that would enable councils to deliver same; and
- (iii) Confirm those responsibilities which would integrate and add value to what Councils already do whilst not conflicting with any of its existing statutory/ regulatory roles.

Council would note that local government already has a role in ‘*Community Relations*’ in the context Good Relations. It believes that, whilst the Council is always open to change, any enhanced responsibilities should only be taken on a phased basis allowing for adequate time for them to be integrated within Council structures through appropriate organisational and service design.

2. NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to the list of suggested ‘10 specific asks’ outlined above. Is there anything else that should be included? Are there any ‘asks’ listed above that should not be included?

Response: Council is supportive of the concept of requesting the NI Executive to include ‘specific asks’ as referenced within the consultation document into the next Programme for Government (PfG). It would however note that some are specifically timed to be in place/ completed within timeframes which could be passed by the time a new NI Executive Programme for Government is realised. Whilst completion dates can focus minds to ensure they are delivered Council however believes an overall date should be included by when the ‘specific asks’ will be included in the Programme for Government.

In relation to the introduction of a new civil Contingencies Bill, Council would also strongly recommend the identification of a proposed lead Minister/government department for civil contingencies to give strong strategic leadership and authority to enhance NI resilience.

Furthermore, ‘specific asks’ which require councils taking on new powers and responsibilities should be deferred to the next Council term of 2019-2023 to allow sufficient time and space for transformation in how the Council delivers its services relating to the current wave of local government reform to take hold. This in particular relates to the ‘specific asks’ where powers are being sought on:

- (i) Skills and Employment Support; and
- (ii) Traffic Management Powers

Council believes that further consideration should be given to the appropriateness of local government having a monitoring role on the impending review of the Code of Conduct for Councillors. A conflict of interest, whether real or perceived, may not make it appropriate for local government/ councils to have such an oversight role and may be rather more suited to being a consultee as part of any review process.

3. NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to NILGA seeking a commitment from all NI Executive departments to engage with councils, prior to making financial decisions that will have an impact on local councils.

Response: Council agrees that a commitment should be sought and obtained from NI Executive Departments to engage with councils on an individual level. A mechanism which allows for proactive meaningful engagement should be initiated, where councils are more than just consulted on impending changes but involved in

discussions to arrive at outcomes that satisfy all both parties. Without adequate and sustainable funding, local councils will be unable to go further to support the wellbeing of communities through funding or partnership working.

Council would stress that debates on public spending should not be about the respective balance sheets of different levels of government, but about the provision of vital services on which people rely.

4. NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to the proposed 'Guiding Principles' outlined above. Are they acceptable and should any be added or taken away?

Response: Council believes that the guiding principles are sufficient as a starting point to foster good working relationships between local and central government.

In relation to "Community Involvement", Council would recommend that this should be reworded as "Community Planning" - a process led by Councils in conjunction with partners and communities to develop and implement a shared vision for their area, a long term vision which relates to all aspects of community life.

5. NILGA would be keen to hear the views of councils in relation to NILGA lobbying the NI Executive to ensure that the next Programme for Government includes local government as a key partner and that the PFG core targets are outcomes focused.

Response: The Council is supportive of NILGA lobbying the NI Executive to ensure local government is a key partner in the delivery of relevant strands of the Programme for Government but only where activities are directly relevant to council service provision.

Whilst this would encourage greater synergy between central and local government the Council would however caution against local government becoming involved in delivering what could be considered core services of central government, where Councils have no statutory basis to provide and consequently no resources to deliver same. It is important that local councils are not seen as the "delivery mechanism" for central government departments, with little control over the direction of travel.

The Council would therefore request that any core targets being considered for inclusion within the Programme for Government, which involve local government commitment to fulfil, should be consulted with all Councils before being agreed.

