



**Report: Preparation Forum for Partnership Panel**

**Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> October 2014, Glenavon Hotel, Cookstown**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Council / Organisation</b>
Councillor Joan Baird	Causeway Coast and Glens District Council
Councillor Josephine Deehan	Fermanagh and Omagh District Council
Councillor Gerardine Mulvenna	Mid and East Antrim District Council
Councillor Tony Quinn	Mid Ulster District Council
Councillor Elisha McCallion	Derry and Strabane District Council
Councillor Eddie Thompson	North Down and Ards District Council
Councillor Arnold Hatch	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council
Councillor Evelyne Robinson	NILGA
Councillor Sean McPeake	NILGA

**Friday 17<sup>th</sup> November 2014, NILGA Offices**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Council / Organisation</b>
Councillor Geraldine Rice	Lisburn and Castlereagh District Council
Councillor Mandy Girvan	Newtownabbey and Antrim District Council
Councillor Dermot Curran	NILGA

**Apologies were received from Councillors Stephen Burns (Newry, Mourne and Down) and Paula Bradshaw (Belfast City); separate engagements are being sought with them to ensure consistent and thorough input.**

## **1. Partnership Panel Forum – why it met and what its members require**

The Preparation Forum sessions for Partnership Panel members and NILGA were set up to open discussions among regional Local Government representatives appointed by Councils to the Panel and the Association. The Forum allowed collective analysis of important issues surrounding the Partnership Panel's effectiveness, *from local government's perspective*, in advance of the first formal meeting of the Panel which will be called by the Environment Minister. As no dates have yet been offered, the Association took action (as determined by many Presiding & Deputy Presiding Councillors who participated with NILGA in the Regional Leaders meeting of 29/08/2014).

The main points raised by LG Partnership Panel Members on what the Partnership Panel needs to achieve for the local government sector are:

- Get the terms of engagement right from the start. NILGA should work with DoE in a joint secretariat, as regional body and responsible Department. The Partnership Panel should embody *political and jointly co-ordinated* partnership working between central and local government. Unlike the Regional Transition Committee (RTC), and the Political Reference Group (PRG), formats which have gone before, a joint secretariat arrangement for the Partnership Panel provides LG with the tools to ensure that local government's mission criticals are addressed. Panel members recommended this course of action, NILGA office bearers emphasised that they would support the Council nominees.
- Mission critical for the local government sector is the successful transfer of adequately resourced functions from central government to local government – *fit for purpose and cost neutral for councils at point for transfer*. Deloitte's Due Diligence report to date has been revised twice; a final version is awaited, with uncertainty remaining about the costs of aggregated transfers, for each "receiving" Council. 150 days or less to go – we need "hard cash facts". Off street car parks are but one example. As with neighbouring jurisdictions, the Panel has a crucial role in ensuring that any proposed transfers (by way of illustration, community asset transfer of, e.g. reservoirs) **MUST HAVE** a *formal business case transfer scheme* before they are corporately considered – regionally or at specific Council level. "The real impact of Northern Ireland's transfer of functions scheme will be seen one year down the line, as the preparation work was inadequate".
- In regard to rural areas, it was raised that rural councils have difficulty raising revenue through rates due to the lower populations in these council areas. This is an issue which should be considered by the Partnership Panel, as

Councils attempt to get their funding right for 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015 and beyond. “The Exchequer Grant is open for being removed or substantially cut”.

- Local government representatives need to consider the Partnership Panel as a regional, politically led, Local Government team – “we fought to get it, let’s not work as separate players but as one team”.
- Members proposed that it would be useful to have NILGA organise pre-meetings well in advance of Partnership Panel meetings to shape the agenda of Partnership Panel meetings. Pre-meetings will provide LG Partnership Panel Members with the opportunity to air “mission criticals” not just for their respective councils but for the region as a whole. *NILGA will provide an information template to Partnership Panel representatives to collate their key issues in advance of pre-meetings, if enabled to do so by Councils.* NILGA will as requested by Councils provide the administration and the co-ordination and *Local Government Partnership Panel Members and their Councils will set the Agenda.*

Following the primary discussion among members of what the Partnership Panel should set out to achieve, it was agreed that another pre-meeting be organised for January 2015. Wales Partnership Panel support players, to include Steve Thomas, WLGA’s CEO and the Vice Chair of the Welsh Partnership Panel, (Cllr Mel Nott), will be invited to share their experiences with NI’s LG Partnership Panel representatives and to provide advice in terms of our own Partnership Panel moving forward. The meeting in January will also provide Local government side of the Partnership Panel gain further awareness and capacity, outside of the formal meetings themselves.

## **2. Context – (Presentation, Derek McCallan)**

NILGA’s CEO provided a presentation to Members. The key message in his presentation - The ***Partnership Panel needs to change things***:

### **Regional Political Leadership -why?**

- Impacts of transferring functions
- Assembly – Council policy relationships
- Financial Constraints – what is affordable
- Performance Improvement
- Legislation tsunami
- Code of Conduct
- Robust, cross Party evidence – a case to the NI Executive
- Councils will determine performance, not Bureaucrats

- Bad legislation = bin it
- Regional, collective work and policy which is politically overseen, smartly resourced and customer driven
- Simple and democratic ethical standards
- A Panel with teeth, negotiating not being told to “TURN UP and COUGH UP”. This was seen as an ambition, since the Panel is presently an advisory body per the legislation.

### **3. Partnership Panel in Wales**

Paper B, an extract from the Terms of Reference for the Partnership Council for Wales was provided to Members for information. Paper was noted by Members, who felt that it was a better embodiment of Partnership, whilst accepting that it, too, could be improved and required input from LG political leaders at regional level (WLGA) and the 6 councillors representing the 22 councils across Wales.

### **4. Interactive Session**

At this stage of the meeting, LG PP representatives were asked for their opinions regarding the following Partnership Panel issues:

#### **Q1: Are you supportive of this being a regional body?**

##### Regional and Local -

*Regional:* Supportive of this being a regional body as there is strength in unity - putting sector wide mission criticals on the table.

*Local:* LG Partnership Panel representatives are mandated by their own councils to speak on their behalf, putting the council’s mission criticals on the table.

#### **Q2: Do you think it should be an advisory or negotiating body?**

For Partnership Panel to have teeth, it needs to become a negotiating body. Also for Local Government side to be strong, LG reps who have been nominated on to Partnership Panel need to commit time to it. The Local Government side needs to be cohesive. We need to “earn our stripes” – develop an evidence base to support our sector / council mission criticals.

The Local Government Bill defines the Partnership Panel as an “advisory” body. Some members emphasised the importance of the formal, inaugural, Partnership Panel meeting taking place as soon as possible. There are finance issues which

need to be resolved before 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015. The general grant monies are under threat from April 2015.

Due to financial pressures, alternative sources of funding for councils were discussed. As done in other areas such as Hartlepool and Dumfries, some councils have applied for and received funding from Europe. As currently being explored by NILGA there is an opportunity for Councils in Northern Ireland to utilise "NUTS III". This is important in Partnership Panel terms as clearly cross council, regional benefits may accrue. Three members referred to the importance of Councils elected members having a forum of this kind to discuss matters of regional significance. "It should not be the exclusive domain of either officers or members" and NILGA's CEO reminded attendees that the NILGA Executive was designed for that purpose as were local arrangements within Councils.

### **Q3: Should the Partnership Panel be strategically linked to Community Planning policies?**

Yes. If Community Planning is not looked at strategically, it leaves Local Government in a fragmented, weak position. Again this shouldn't be a case of "we will leave that to someone else".

Consultation is currently out re: Statutory Partners for Community Planning. It was noted that there are some departments which will be "statutory" partners, which are not very proactive and engaging at present. Hopefully this can be remedied at the Partnership Panel table.

### **Q4 Context – Partnership Panel policy. What are your views?**

At this stage Members put forward a number of views re: matters that affect their council / Northern Ireland as a whole which should be on the agenda of the Partnership Panel:

- (i) Issues about energy / energy security
  - Spectre of lignite; oil; fracking; tidal energy. Are we going to benefit? Strong case to get money from these energy companies for community benefit.
  
- (ii) Policy, Review of Assembly and Public Service provision in Northern Ireland
  - Local government's perspective on the number of central government departments, the distinct role of MLAs and Councillors, mutual need and mutual respect, NILGA's Programme for Local Government and the emerging Programme for Government.

(iii) Targeting Social Need.

- With welfare reform proposals, deprivation levels will get worse.
- If talking about spend, we need to target those in our communities most in need.
- Councils assuming the right powers, with the right resources at the right time (is there a business or social case for further responsibilities to be transferred – if so, a proper Policy level negotiation is required).

As a sector, we need to develop a strong evidence base to support our arguments at the meeting table.

**Q5 Training - Would you appreciate straightforward accessible training as you progress as Partnership Panel?**

Members were hugely receptive to this idea as long it maintains the format of these sessions and is learning through experience. An example of practical training for example is seeing a live Planning Committee in action; not death by PowerPoint.

**5. Meeting Outcomes and next steps**

- (i) **A training / team building day for Local Government Partnership Panel Members will be organised – as requested - for January 2015, to accommodate PP Members busy schedules, substantial notice will be given for this meeting.**
- (ii) **NILGA on behalf of the Local Government members of the Partnership Panel will seek an early formal inaugural meeting directly with Environment Minister.**
- (iii) **A meeting note and outcomes paper will be prepared and distributed to Local Government Partnership Panel Members by 27<sup>th</sup> October 2014.**