



Northern Ireland Charter for Councillor Development

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

Assessment Date: 26th January 2023

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Recommendation of the Assessment Team

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council have been successful in meeting the standard of the Northern Ireland Councillor Development Charter and have been awarded Charter accreditation status for three years. The assessment took place on the 26th January 2023 to determine if the Council has met the Charter standard. The assessment was based on an analysis of a portfolio of evidence as well as various interviews with key personnel and elected members. The assessors' objectives were to verify the presented evidence and to identify the council's future plans for continuous improvement to councillor learning and development.

The Council has committed to a process of continuous improvement over the next three years to build on this achievement.

The evidence presented in the portfolio was drawn from a wide range of sources and was of a **high standard** and gave an impressive overall view of member Development activities across the council. The evidence within the portfolio was clearly linked to the relevant Charter standards.

The following people were seen during the assessment visit:

Interviews (in order conducted):

- Moira Quinn – Deputy Chief Executive
- Cllr Ivor Wallace - Mayor
- **Key officers:** Pauline Donaghy, Democratic and Central Services Manager, Sinéad Duggan, Civic Support, Committee and Member Services Officer and Eithne Doherty, Civic Support Officer
- **Elected Member Development Steering Group:** Ald Hillis (Chair), Ald Mark Fielding (Vice Chair) and Ald Knight McQuillan
- **Other Councillors:** Cllr Leanne Peacock, Cllr Steven Callaghan and Ald Joan Baird

The Council will be required to undertake a full re-assessment of continuing progress in three years time, July 2024.

All councils that have achieved the Charter status are eligible to apply for Charter Plus accreditation. Full details of the framework and how to apply are available on the NILGA website (www.NILGA.org) but this report contains, at pages 5-6, a preliminary indication of additional evidence that the assessors feel would need to be put into place to achieve Charter Plus status.

If the Council does sign up for Charter Plus, then it will have 12 months from the date of sign up to assessment to achieve the status. The Charter Plus application

should take place no longer than 18 months following the initial assessment. The timetable indicated above for re-assessment against the normal Charter re-assessment will no longer apply.

Assessment team

- Councillor Terry Andrews, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council
- Sarah Taggart, Democratic Services Manager, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council
- Fiona Douglas, Regional Development Manager (Lead Assessor)

Charter standards

- Commitment to councillor development and support
- Strategic approach to councillor development
- Learning and development is effective in building capacity.

Assessment

The commitment to the Charter was made originally by the Council in February 2018, supported by all political groups and was led by the Elected Member Development Steering Group (EMDSG). This commitment was refreshed and reviewed through the Elected Member Development Steering Group at its meeting on 21st January 2021 and reaffirmed by approval at the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee on 26th January 2021.

All councillors interviewed as part of the assessment process spoke of how much they recognised and valued the officer support available to them. Assessors were appreciative of those same officers help in organising a well-structured and welcoming assessment day.

Initial discussions reflected on the pathway Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council have been on to get to this assessment day, demonstrating their determination in bringing member development to the fore. A period of hiatus, linked to a lack of resources and it being only part of a much busier role, was overcome when the pandemic context presented the opportunity to focus, through the Mayoral office, resource on member development. This focus has certainly paid off with an embedded culture of learning and development established and members more aware of the role and skill sets and the comprehensive learning and development offer to support them in reaching the desired level of effectiveness. These were the key strengths that the assessment team determined:

Clear commitment to councillor development and support

- Political and Senior Management discussions referenced cross-party commitment, participation and engagement throughout the process. The Member learning and development strategy and structures are clearly linked to the Council Corporate Plan. The key role that elected members have in determining what they need to be effective in the role was very evident. There was also an understanding amongst senior political and managerial leadership that the training needs analysis is central to this as well as a requirement to be aware of the ever-changing environment and being able to adapt and coordinate at short notice.
- Senior representatives are very clear in terms of the requirement to ensure that Charter commitment is embedded through the corporate plan and that the necessary officer and resource commitment is in place. The importance of ensuring that an understanding of new challenges and skill sets required to meet these challenges was also highlighted as well as clarity of what is not the role of council.

- Engagement with the political and managerial leadership described the Elected Member Development Steering as a sub-group of the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee with full ongoing engagement from the senior management team. The perception and experience is very much that the council has all things in place for the development of members and clear understanding of the EMDWG's role in this. Further demonstrated through the connection to the senior management team with a clear link between the EMDSG and SMT as well as the EMDSG's connection to the wider body of councillor.
- A robust approach and formal structures are in place to identify and prioritise learning and development need, through an individual training needs analysis, supplemented by other service area groups, regional engagement as part of NILGA Network, as well as through staff news. The role of relationships was considered key in the planning and development of the training approach.
- All learning and development opportunities, as evidenced through the various channels, are made available to all 40 members and are met using a variety of approaches, reflective of their different needs. Such need includes a facility for doing it in your own time and at your own convenience.
- The approach is also responsive and reactive to emerging needs, with a recent need for specified training on fraud awareness, which officers were able to source and implement.
- There are adequate financial resources in terms of budget and a highly dedicated officer team that make it all happen with wide recognition and appreciation all the work that goes into this.
- Senior management are acutely aware of the pressures on elected members and recognise they are also people with jobs and families. The nature of the Councillor Development Charter is considered a great enabler for councillors to be more effective in their role, while at the same time being mindful of their different commitments and time pressures. Charter is viewed as a framework that allows for flexibility which ensures maximum participation. Charter is utilised as an effective tool for greater understanding of what the members need and what will help them be more effective in the role.

A Strategic Approach to Councillor Development

- The Council has a member led Member Development Strategy and supporting plans and programmes which have been reviewed.

- The council has a member led and evidenced based learning and Development Programme 2022-23, that was approved in December 2022.
- The councillor learning and development strategy is linked to the corporate plan. The Corporate Strategy reflects through the collective leadership members' target, which members were involved in revising. Council set itself an 85% engagement target and the importance of linking members needs to what the council is trying to achieve is clearly understood. A review was undertaken of all Elected Member Development supporting documents in 2021.
- The approach is flexible with a balanced mix of corporate and one to one, where needed. In particular, completion of the ILM Level 7 Leadership was fully encouraged with participants given ample opportunity to share this learning both internally and externally.
- Communication across council departments is well developed and allows for avoidance of duplication and scope to tap into other budgets. There is an appreciation of the need for creativity as their budget is quite small.
- A three-day comprehensive induction programme has been developed for the new in take of councillors after the May 2023 election.
- A clear understanding of the role of the Councillor Development Charter and its importance in supporting councillors with the issues they face came across strongly. The Charter framework, it is understood, provides the strength, sense of purpose and impetus, without which they just would not be in this position of a more coordinated and holistic approach to training and member development.

Learning and Development is Effective in Building Skills and Knowledge

- The council seeks formal feedback and evaluation through councillors as well as informally through officers, on how worthwhile the training is and if it is having an impact.
- Excellent participation levels of 37/40 councillors in the last six months, were highlighted, as a strong indicator of commitment as well testimony to the quality of the training provided. More informal training was also referenced and while not a formally recognised qualification, has received really positive feedback.
- The Council has robust checks and balances in place related to resource and budget with ongoing scrutiny by the EMDWG. Member development is also included in the business plan with its own performance indicator, which is reviewed every six months. The Corporate Strategy is also reflective through the collective leadership members' target, which members were involved in revising. Council set itself an 85%

engagement target and the importance of linking members needs to what the council is trying to achieve is clearly understood.

- The importance of the training for being effective in the role was stressed and well appreciated. Clearly understood that without the training, a councillor will be in a difficult position to do the job. Training is seen as key in ensuring councillors have the skill set for the role.
- In terms of impact, the proof is considered to be in the pudding, related to the decision making in the council chamber, the level of input on policy and procedures as well as the relationships.

‘If everybody knows what they are doing and how they should be doing ...
... Strengthens democracy...’

- There is a real appreciation of the continuous improvement nature of the Councillor Development Charter framework. It is recognised, that the current plan is suitable for the current membership and dynamics, however come the May 2023 elections, it will need to be aligned to what the new intakes needs are. It is also appreciated that it must be responsive to varying experience, in terms of new and more experienced members. A clear understanding was demonstrated that it is about:

‘Trying to get the new members up to scratch and keep those with experience ahead of the game. Trying to strike the fine balance of getting them up to speed without overwhelming them.’

- There is an understanding that members are good at telling the team what hasn’t worked well, with evaluation and feedback collated and tweaks fed through into delivery.
- Elected members themselves recognise the amount of work that has gone in to ensuring that it is member led and suits their needs. The impact of which, they feel, has played out in the chamber or committees, making the wider councillor body take notice of those members developing and thinking they should be doing this too. The overall profile of the training and the member development has dramatically risen with 37/40 councillors participating in something in the last six months, a realisation that it is in their interest to be involved.

Assessors' suggested improvement areas:

The following are areas that the Council should work towards over the next three years. They will act as a focus to take member development forward across the Council along with further improvement areas that the Council itself will identify between now and January 2026 that reflect emerging priorities.

- The Elected Member Development Steering Group should develop an annual work programme of priorities to ensure continued forward momentum for member development. This should also include a focus on evaluating the effectiveness of learning in relation to cost benefit analysis and impact. This will assist greatly in measuring and promoting the impact of elected member development.
- The council should strengthen the approach to commit to Personal Development Planning (PDP) programme to ensure engagement of “all” councillors and to identify new development priorities. Led by the EMDSG and supported by group leaders, the PDP approach should encourage and support the participation of all councillors to have access to a personal Development Plan. A target of 60-70% of Members having a Plan within 6 months of the May 2023 election.
- The Council should build on the momentum created by the pandemic on E-learning and further develop the Learning Management System to support a more strategic approach to E- Learning, that supports a range of member learning styles.
- Enhancement of the three-day induction programme to include the role of the councillor reflective of the 21st Century Councillor.
- The Elected Member Development Group should develop and lead an internal mentoring programme in preparation for providing newly elected Members following the May 2023 election, with structured mentor support.
- Continue to engage with Leadership Development to enhance strategic leadership and decision-making skills.

Charter Plus

A preliminary indication of the additional steps that the Council would need to demonstrate under each standard in order to achieve Charter plus status is set out below. NILGA would be happy to discuss these in more detail at any time, and further information is available via <https://www.nilga.org/councillor-charter/charter-for-councillor-development>

1. Commitment to councillor development and support

- Provide evidence that the budget is properly reviewed, set & prioritised by the Elected Member Development Group.
- Provide evidence that Member development/support staff have access to their own ongoing professional development.
- Provide evidence that Member development and support staff are involved in regional and national learning networks.
- Ensure that the Council promotes local democracy including events to encourage people and under-represented groups to engage with Council.

2. Strategic approach to councillor development

- Provide evidence of a robust evaluation process and that evaluation feedback contributes to the review and further development of the member development strategy. Some form of impact assessment at the community level would be required.
- Provide evidence that the senior management team meets to review member development at least once per year (to ensure ongoing linkage to corporate plan, to identify its impact and to suggest improvements).
- Provide evidence that members are clear about the role of partner bodies, other stakeholder bodies, their own role on partner bodies and their own role in relation to other stakeholder bodies.
- Provide evidence that at least 60% of Member's have in place a Personal Development Plan and review the plan annually.
- Provide evidence that external partners are involved in relevant development sessions.

- Provide evidence of leadership development to enhance strategic leadership and decision making skills..
- Provide evidence of a post induction meeting, held with new members 6 months after their election in order to identify any gaps in development and support.

3. Learning and development is effective in building capacity

- Provide evidence that end of event evaluation feeds into impact evaluation and to a review of the training programme.
- Provide evidence of post event follow-up evaluation to assess performance change (e.g. Through a PDP process).
- Provide evidence that Members report back to group on conferences and external development opportunities.

Congratulations on achieving the Charter standard!

The Council may use the national councillor development charter logo.

We look forward to the Council continuing to support NILGA in promoting the benefits of the Charter to councils across Northern Ireland.

The process of assessment undertaken in the Council may be subject to a quality assurance review by the Local Government Association.

Fiona Douglas
Regional Development Manager, NILGA
For and on behalf of the Assessment Team
March 2023