Note of Partnership Panel Local Government Meeting
Thursday, 21st April 2016
Antrim Civic Centre

Present: Ald Mark Cosgrove, Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council, Andrea McCooke, Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council, Ald Tom McKeown, Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council, Ald Sam Cole, Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council, Cllr Maoliosa McHugh, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Rachelle Craig, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Cllr Jo Deehan, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Joan McCafferty, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Roy Lawther, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, Ald Gerardine Mulvenna, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Cllr Sean McPeake, Mid Ulster District Council/ NILGA Office Bearer, Anthony Tohill, Mid Ulster District Council, Cllr Dermot Curran, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council/ NILGA Office Bearer, Ald Freda Donnelly, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council/ NILGA Office Bearer, Ald Alan McDowell, Ards and North Down Borough Council/ NILGA Office Bearer, Derek McCallan, NILGA, Claire Bradley, NILGA, Nichola Creagh, Department of the Environment


Communications Plan
- Communication is of utmost importance for the success of the Partnership Panel.
- Requirement that Partnership Panel is added as a standing item on a Council Committee agenda.
- It was agreed that items raised by council should be forwarded to NILGA, as joint secretariat, in order to bring forward issues as appropriate. It was also agreed that criteria should be applied to ensure that issues that are brought to the Partnership Panel are strategic, of regional significance and are not being furthered through another avenue.

Community Planning
- At a council level, Community Planning is making reasonable progress.
- Will be important for the Partnership Panel to consider the issue of Community Planning and how it will be resourced by central government going forward.
- Recognised that central government has made a mixed contribution to Community Planning to date and that this will need to be built upon with the help of new departments and the Partnership Panel.
- Will be important to brief the incoming Minister for Communities of the key issues relating to Community Planning.
Taking forward the Partnership Panel in the new mandate

- Members noted the streamlined draft Partnership Panel Work Plan 2016 – 2019, agreeing that the work of the Partnership Panel should be high-level, strategic and collectively impact on local councils.
- Members felt it will be important to distinguish between issues that should be considered by the Partnership Panel and those issues that should be taken forward by an individual council, or a group of councils with the appropriate Minister separately.
- There should be a flow of work between NILGA (as joint secretariat) and councils to keep councils up-to-date with progress of issues raised by councils.
- It was felt that the whole mechanism to date has been very stilted and formalised; and the opportunity for meaningful work has been missed. It was suggested that Task and Finish groups should be established to sit underneath the main Partnership Panel to undertake work on behalf of the Partnership Panel and feedback with options for consideration and approval. One example put forward for Task and Finish Working Group included a group to look finance for local government in terms of loans, European opportunities etc.
- Disappointment was also expressed in relation to the engagement on the Partnership Panel by Ministers.
- It was suggested that the next Partnership Panel meeting should be scheduled to take place after a NI Executive meeting, to ensure a high level of attendance from Ministers.
- It was further suggested that Partnership Panel meetings go forward on a thematic basis, so that Ministers know which meetings are important for them to attend.

Issues raised by individual councils sent to Joint Secretariat

- Members noted that legislation naming statutory partners for Community Planning is now in place.
- Members noted the template used by Causeway Coast & Glens to report issues to NILGA (as joint secretariat). NILGA will draft and circulate a template that councils may want to use as a mechanism for reporting issues to Partnership Panel via the joint secretariat.

Training for Partnership Panel members

- Members agreed that training for Partnership Panel members in relation to awareness of Programme for Government policies and targets, as well as applying an agreed communications practice between councils, departments and joint secretariat would be useful.
- The NILGA Chief Executive advised that he would work up options to present to Partnership Panel local government members for consideration at a later meeting.

Any other business

- One member queried the progress of the review of the Code of Conduct. It was confirmed that the Independent Review Panel has just completed their report and it is due to go to the Environment Minister in the next couple of days. It is expected that any changes proposed will need to be consulted upon by the new Minister for Communities.
- It was noted that additional amendments may need to be made to other sections of the Code of Conduct even after review recommendations have been implemented.
- Members raised the following concerns in relation to the Code of Conduct:
  - That councillors, even if exonerated, are not permitted to talk about the process/outcome of the investigation;
o If a complaint is made now, councillors will be subject to the existing Code of Conduct, rather than a revised Code;
o The Code, as it stands, is anti-democratic and anti-normal party politics.
o There should be a mechanism to ‘flush out’ frivolous complaints.

- It was agreed that the Partnership Panel should consider this issue again as soon as practical and that the new Minister for Communities should be briefed as a matter of priority on the difficulties of the existing Code.
- Nichola Creagh, DOE, advised that the new Minister will be advised of these issues in their “first day brief” and that Code of Conduct matters will be marked as ‘urgent’.
- One member also raised the issue of Ministerial call-in, in relation to planning decisions, asserting that the Minister should be required to provide a rationale for calling a council decision in.

Date of Next Meeting
- It is hoped that the next Partnership Panel meeting will take place in late June. The joint secretariat will be in touch to confirm date/time.

NILGA, Partnership Panel Joint Secretariat
April 2016