

Central- Local Government Political Partnership Forum
Friday 18th January 2019
Stormont Hotel

Present: *Ald Freda Donnelly, Armagh Banbridge District Council/NILGA Office Bearer; Peter Weir MLA Ald Arnold Hatch, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council/ NILGA Office Bearer, Roy Beggs MLA, Cllr Seán McPeake, Mid Ulster Council / NILGA Office Bearer; Fra McCann MLA, Cllr Seamus Doyle, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council; NILGA OB Alternate; Mark H. Durkan, MLA; Ald Alan McDowell, Ards and North Down Borough Council/NILGA Office Bearer; John Blair MLA; Cllr Maoliosa McHugh, Derry and Strabane District Council; Cllr Richard Smart, Ards and North Down Borough Council; Sharon McAleer, Mid Ulster District Council, Cllr Scott Carson, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council; Ald Tom McKeown, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Cllr Ryan Murphy (supporting Fra McCann MLA, member of Belfast City Council); Nichola Creagh, DFC; Derek McCallan; NILGA, Karen Smyth; NILGA, Lisa O’Kane, NILGA; Antoinette Kennedy, NILGA*

Apologies: *Cllr Dermot Curran, NILGA President / Newry Mourne and Down District Council, Colin McGrath MLA, Alderman Gerardine Mulvenna, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council; Ald Robert Smith, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, Ald Mark Cosgrove, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council*

Overview

The Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum convened for its third meeting in Belfast on 18th January 2019. The meeting was well attended by Councillors and MLAs across the 5 main Political Parties and the 11 Councils.

Key items on the Agenda included:

- Refreshing the Terms of Reference for the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum
- Miscellaneous Roads Order 2010 – Communication and Next Steps
- A presentation from the Department for Communities; what we can / must do collaboratively with councils in the Year Ahead.

Outcomes from Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum, 24th August 2018

The Outcomes Note from Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum convened on 24th August were proposed by John Blair MLA and seconded by Cllr Richard Smart.

Karen Smyth, Head of Policy and Governance, NILGA, provided an update on developments since the Forum’s last meeting in August 2018:

Contingency planning

Funding has been approved until 2021 but it should be noted that this doesn't include extra resource that may be necessary in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Letters are already going out from councils to local businesses to help prepare for e.g. import/export issues they may face.

Waste management

Some progress has been made since the last forum meeting. SOLACE organised an Officer Workshop on 26th October 2018 and considered the outcomes at their November meeting. With strong agreement that 11 council collaboration is desirable, the Technical Advisers Group (TAG) was charged with preparing a paper on resources necessary for collaboration and to give initial ideas about form. A request for resources will go to councils soon.

The next Central Local Strategic Waste Partnership meeting is planned for 30th January 2019 which, in addition to collaborative local government delivery, will consider the issue of funding for recycling centres further to the passing of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act at Westminster.

NILGA will soon be considering its post-election policy machinery and the potential need for a health and environment policy network to provide better knowledge and scrutiny of this area of work.

Education

Since the last Forum Meeting, Sharon O'Connor, Chair of the Education Authority issued for the attention of the Forum a list of "small" towns with more two schools. She also provided details of all schools in Northern Ireland with an enrolment of 50 pupils or less.

In her correspondence, to the Forum, dated 6th November 2018, she stated, *"The Education Authority recognises the importance of strengthening partnership and collaborative working through community planning. To ensure traction in this area we have recently appointed a senior officer with responsibility for Community Planning and he will be supported by a small team of officers working across all eleven LGDs. This work will enhance the links already provided through the designated Assistant Directors who sits on the Strategic Community Planning Partnerships."*

With reference to the data provided by the Education Authority, John Blair MLA advised that he required more detailed information; for example, 2+ schools with less than 50 pupils near each other in villages and smaller towns. Mr Blair advised that he'd use his own endeavours to source the information, with the Forum following up also. Peter Weir MLA advised that he will also provide feedback to the Education Authority.

Refreshing the Terms of Reference for the Central – Local Political Partnership Forum

Derek McCallan, NILGA Chief Executive provided a short presentation on refreshing the Terms of Reference for Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum.

In the absence of the Legislative Assembly and the statutory Ministerial Partnership Panel the Central – Local Political Partnership Forum can usefully provide political scrutiny and joint (two levels of elected members) awareness on key local and central government policy and budget matters, in a regionally co-ordinated setting.

There is support from existing members, several government departments, councils and their Chief Executives, for the Central- Local Government Political Partnership Forum.

The Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum is an *interim* arrangement until such times as the statutory Ministerial Political Partnership Panel is reconvened.

In terms of frequency, the Central – Local Political Partnership Forum seeks to meet 4 times a year; or if a critical issue/s arise in between scheduled meetings; urgent meetings of the Forum can be convened.

NILGA will co-ordinate the Central – Local Political Partnership Forum and will seek formal input from the Department for Communities (DfC), as an axis between local and central government, following written support from the new DfC Permanent Secretary, Tracy Meharg.

For the Forum to be effective and to make impact it is important that there is regional, cross-party, two-tier government formal involvement in the Forum.

Members considered and discussed the draft Terms of Reference for the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum. Ald Alan McDowell highlighted the importance of the Forum convening regularly in the absence of the statutory Partnership Panel. He also commented on the format of the statutory Partnership Panel; ALL Ministers were invited to every meeting of the Partnership Panel, which was not a good use of their time, especially if there were no items on the Agenda relevant to the Department/s. As a Forum, we should be identifying the issues which need to be addressed and inviting the Permanent Secretaries whose input is required for the issues identified.

Alderman McDowell added that selective council Chief Executive representation as well as specific Permanent Secretary representation is important for future meetings of the Forum for a true “knowledge and partnership” approach. Cllr Maoliosa McHugh seconded the importance of council Chief Executive representatives being at future meetings of the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum.

Cllr Richard Smart commented that he had high hopes of the statutory Political Partnership Panel when it started out. When the Assembly went down and the Panel ceased to meet, he thought that the Civil Service would engage more with Local Government representatives on the Panel; however, this has not been the case- most of the discussion is through SOLACE. There needs to be a mechanism to feedback what is being discussed to this Forum, and vice versa, as illustrated diagrammatically. In this way, it could be a transformative Forum.

Referring to the “Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum” interim arrangements diagram, Fra McCann MLA added that all the Political Parties were meeting with the Permanent

Secretaries and the Secretary of State – the Forum could join this up and avoid being at odds with the work of the Political Parties.

Mark H. Durkan MLA commented that he concurred with most of what has been said. We were in danger of double democratic deficit; the Central – Local Government Political Forum addresses this. In terms of the statutory Partnership Panel, interest did wane from some of the Ministers and their Departments. When inviting Permanent Secretaries / Department officials to future meetings of the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum; it must be on a needs-must, high level overview and specific matters, combined.

Cllr Scott Carson commented that when high level issues are raised with the Civil Service, the response received is often not adequate. A letter was sent by his council to a government department in October 2018; a response was only received from the government department in the last week (late January 2019). If Ministers were still in position, there would be a “door to rap” – underpinned by respect and understanding. In the absence of the Assembly, the Central – Local Government Forum is the body which has democratically elected members - we should support the commencement of high-level engagement across the board.

Nichola Creagh, DfC, provided clarification on the meetings between council Chief Executives and the Permanent Secretaries. The Standing Meeting between the Permanent Secretaries and Chief Executives was set up to support the work being taken forward by the statutory Political Partnership Panel. When the Assembly collapsed, and the work of the statutory Partnership Panel was interrupted; the Permanent Secretaries and Council Chief Executives continued to meet – it should not be a standalone body. Cllr McHugh responded by stating that the Forum was the democratic scrutiny “missing link”.

Discussion ensued on whether council Chief Executives and Permanent Secretaries should be part of the Forum, with clear support for same. As the Central-Local Government Political Partnership Forum is a democratically elected body; Permanent Secretaries and Council Chief Executives should be formally invited if they are required to contribute to Forum Meetings.

Discussion also ensued about the Secretary of State as Chair of the Forum; however, this was not agreed.

The following actions were agreed:

- **The draft Terms of Reference for the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum will be revised and circulated to Forum Members and Councils.**
- **The Permanent Secretary from the Department for Infrastructure will be invited to the next Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum.**

Miscellaneous Roads Order 2010 – Communication and Next Steps

Katrina Godfrey, the Permanent Secretary for Department for Infrastructure will be meeting with NILGA, SOLACE and the PSNI in the next couple of weeks to discuss difficulties arising from the implementation of the Roads (Miscellaneous Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010.

Karen Smyth, NILGA, addressed the Forum. At present there is little room for manoeuvre without changing the legislation. There is however an opportunity for efficiencies. Efficiencies can be achieved, if councils work together and work collectively to collate and advertise an annual calendar of events. Councils will also need to work with the PSNI on this matter. Discussion ensued on the difficulties and high costs encountered by councils in the organisation of events. Councils run events often with community and specialist partners to bring people into their areas and support social engagement. Councils are incurring high costs including for traffic management since the change, to run these events.

The implementation of this legislation has resulted in a cost saving for the PSNI and it is the view of NILGA and councils that some of these cost savings should be transferred to local government.

Community groups are also struggling; many are reliant on their local council to bear some of the costs for running community events.

Members present advised of instances in their own council area where events have had to be cancelled or are under threat due to high traffic management costs and other expenditure incurred for running events. Alderman Alan McDowell, Ards and North Down Borough Council, advised that the Ards Half Marathon has ceased due to prohibitive costs of traffic management. More and more community events will not take place because of this unintentional consequence. Cllr Sharon McAleer, Mid Ulster District Council advised that some events in her council area had to be changed because of the cost of road closures.

The following actions were agreed:

- **NILGA will feed back to this Forum, the outcomes of the multi-agency meeting between Katrina Godfrey, DFI Permanent Secretary, NILGA, SOLACE and the PSNI.**
- **In advance of the next Forum, a collation exercise will take place with councils on issues (including road closures) which need to be raised with the Dfi Permanent Secretary.**

Issues raised by Councils

In a letter to NILGA from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Broadband Working Group Members expressed concern at the often lengthy delays in receiving responses from Northern Ireland government departments.

Members also commented that on occasion, the responses do not address the queries raised nor make any effort to resolve the matter in hand. Conscious of the Interim Partnership Panel “Central –

Local Government Political Partnership Forum”, the Broadband Working Group has asked for the Forum to raise this issue with the Civil Service and seek to establish if there is any guidance in place for Departments when dealing with correspondence from another branch of Government, namely District Councils.

Working Group Members are also keen to ascertain if there is any recognition within the Civil Service of the role of elected members and the need to ensure their comments and concerns are appropriately addressed and taken seriously.

The following action was agreed:

- **Political Forum Members agreed to support and refer the letter from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council to The Executive Office (TEO).**

Department for Communities; What we can do with councils – The Year Ahead

Nichola Creagh, Department for Communities, provided an overview of work taken forward with Councils in the year past and plans for the year ahead.

In her opening comments she reiterated what Tracy Meharg, Permanent Secretary for the Department of Communities said in a letter to the NILGA Office Bearers supporting the work of the interim Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum.

The key points from Nichola Creagh’s presentation are summarised in the paragraphs below.

In the year ahead, DfC will continue the collaboration and partnership working between local and central government.

Community Planning

The Community Planning Partnerships are an example of where collaboration is working well. Elected Members and local government, departments and community, voluntary and private organisations are working together making practical differences on the ground.

In November 2019, there will be a statement on Community Planning progress. It will be the first opportunity to look at how the Community Planning Partnerships have worked.

Performance Improvement

DfC will continue to collaborate with the Local Government Working Group on Performance Improvement comprising of officials from central government departments, SOLACE and NILGA.

DfC officials are currently collaborating with NILGA, SOLACE and the Northern Ireland Audit Office on an upcoming collaboration; a “*Performance Improvement for Transforming Councils – Councillor Masterclass*” taking place on 28th January 2019 in the Antrim Civic Centre.

Review of Local Government

There was concern around recent correspondence to SOLACE from the DfC in relation to the Review of Local Government. There was no malice or forethought; it was administrative misinterpretation. The terms of reference for the review will be of future interest to this Forum.

Local Works

“Local Works” is an employability programme which demonstrates what can be delivered when you do things in a community focused and local way. The programme links in to the Skills Strategy and City Deals.

A collaborative future – working together

We need to develop better collaboration and better working relationships across government to deliver the Programme for Government. It is about improving the lives of our citizens. We deliver better by working together.

Discussion ensued following Nichola Creagh’s address to the Forum. Cllr McPeake referred to misunderstandings of the Planning Review. Hostile media homed in on the costs incurred; rather than the costs and savings over a 15 – 20-year period.

Cllr McPeake added that Local Government need to have substantial input in any proposed review of RPA. Cllr McPeake also referred to the proposed review of Community Planning in 2021. Nichola Creagh provided assurance that any review being proposed will be done in collaboration with local government.

Alderman Hatch referred to recent transfer of functions from central government to local government where monies did not transfer with the functions. He also referred to the Regeneration function which did not transfer to Local Councils. In response, Nichola Creagh commented the future transfer of Regeneration and other functions will be a matter for Ministers when they return. On the issue of the Regeneration function, the DfC’s Regeneration teams do work with local government.

John Blair MLA referred to the proposed “reviews” and commented that review should be built into major public service. For example, in the past there was little exploration of Local Government structures, for example the Waste structures and their value for money.

Mr Blair also referred to the review of councils’ Community Plans and the need for attention to “inclusion and diversity”. There are some councils in Northern Ireland which do not champion inclusion and diversity – he asked if these are issues which will be reviewed? In response, Nichola Creagh advised that a requirement of the Community Planning Partnerships is to have inclusivity and diversity in all areas. The Community Plans of all councils are different. As part of the Review there will be an exploration of how the Partnerships can be improved and sharing of good practice.

In concluding the discussion, Derek McCallan added that in alignment with the RPA reviews proposed, NILGA will be commissioning a more detailed review by the end of March 2019, the intention being to align it to the Department's proposals.

Update on Code of Conduct and Councillors Guide

NILGA is currently preparing the Councillors Guide in time for the May 2019 Local Government Elections. Members discussed the importance of the Councillors Guide and a Code of Conduct which is easy to understand and implement, and more consistent with the MLA Code of Code.

It was also noted with significant frustration that the independent Code of Conduct Review is awaiting Ministerial sign off.

AONB

There was consensus in the room on the importance of the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum in the absence of the Assembly and the statutory Political Partnership Panel.

Alderman McDowell commented that we should be communicating the existence of the Forum, the 5 Political Parties; Central and Local Government working together. Mark Durkan MLA added we are all on the same side. The elephant in the room - no legislative Assembly. Mr Durkan stated that we need to get the Assembly back and requested the same message be relayed to our Parties, referencing the litany of problems the impasse is causing.

Date for next meeting of the Central – Local Political Partnership Forum to follow.

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