

Central- Local Government Political Partnership Forum
Friday 27th September 2019
NILGA Offices

Present: Fra McCann MLA, Sinn Féin; Peter Weir MLA, DUP and Robbie Butler MLA, UUP; Ald Stephen Moutray, NILGA Office Bearer Alternate; Cllr Stephen Dunne, Ards and North Down Borough Council; Ald Tom McKeown, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council; Ald Billy Ashe MBE, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council; Cllr Robert Burgess, Newry Mourne and Down District Council; Cllr Matt Garrett, NILGA Office Bearer /Belfast City Council; Cllr Christine McFlynn, Mid Ulster District Council; Cllr Martin Kearney, NILGA Office Bearer; and Ald Alan McDowell, NILGA Office Bearer.

Apologies: Cllr Frances Burton, NILGA President / Mid Ulster District Council; Ald Danny Kinahan, NILGA Office Bearer / Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council; Cllr Sheamus Greene, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council; Cllr Geraldine McAteer, Belfast City Council; and Cllr Ruairi McHugh, Derry City and Strabane District Council; John Blair, Alliance, and Mark H. Durkan MLA, SDLP.

Keynote presentations were provided by: NI Water: Sara Venning, Chief Executive
NIFRS: Michael Graham, Chief Fire and Rescue Officer

Local Government Officer Representation:

Louise Kennedy, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council

Ann McCullough, Ards and North Down Borough Council

NILGA: Derek McCallan, Karen Smyth, Lisa O’Kane, Antoinette Kennedy

Welcome and Introductions

Derek McCallan, NILGA CEO welcomed everyone to the fifth meeting of the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum. The Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum is an interim arrangement for the statutory Partnership in the absence of Ministers and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The emphasis is on discussion and working collegiately to address issues of regional, all Northern Ireland concern. This body is about governance of Northern Ireland despite absence of the Assembly.

The meeting commenced with a round of introductions. Derek McCallan also provided a short overview of the key items on the Agenda.

Outcomes from Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum, 28th June 2019

The minutes of the last meeting were noted.

Code of Conduct – Concerns raised at the last Forum have been communicated to the Review Group convened by the DfC to review and evaluate the Local Government Legislation Framework over the next 3 years. The Forum will be kept updated.

DoF Business Rates Consultation – The Department of Finance launched their Business Rates Consultation in mid September. The closing date for submissions to the consultation is 11th November 2019.

Action: The Business Rates Consultation will be discussed at the NILGA Executive meeting scheduled for 11th October 2019, and NILGA will be collaborating with the 11 Councils to agree a formal response. Closing date for consultation responses is 11th November 2019.

Issues raised by Councils for discussion at Forum

Derek McCallan drew Members attention to paper on issues to date which have been raised by Councils for discussion at the Forum:

Mid Ulster District Council: Social Housing Demand and Housing Stress – Infrastructure deficit.

The water and sewerage infrastructure deficit is resulting in house building not keeping up with housing demand, hence many citizens in the Mid Ulster area are facing housing stress and homelessness. Mid Ulster Council have requested that NI Water and the Utility Regulator prioritise investment over the next 5 year period. For an informed discussion on the critical issues affecting the region; Sara Venning from NI Water will be participating in today's Forum.

Mid and East Antrim Borough Council: NIFRS Budget Pressures

In light of recent news speculation concerning NIFRS budget pressures, and the potential to reduce provision at a number of stations, elected members in Mid and East Antrim Borough Council are concerned. The Council has asked that the issues pertaining to Fire Station provision be raised at the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum. The Chief officer of the NIFRS, Michael Graham and his colleagues will be in attendance today to discuss the budget pressures they are facing and to discuss changes to their operational model.

Keynote Presentation 1 – Northern Ireland Water:

“Risk to Northern Ireland’s Growth Ambitions”

Sara Venning, Chief Executive of NI Water, spoke about how Northern Ireland plays a vital role in enabling Northern Ireland’s growth; however “Northern Ireland’s growth ambitions”

as outlined in the Draft Programme for Government, the Industrial Strategy for Northern Ireland, and Council's Local Development Plans, may be put at risk due to ageing water and wastewater networks which are struggling with increasing demand and volumes.

As highlighted by Ms Venning in her presentation, Waste water facilities in 99 towns across all 11 Council areas are at or near capacity which will have a knock-on effect on housing, business expansions, Councils local development projects and "city deal" projects. By 2027, it is anticipated that Waste water facilities in a further 33 towns will be at full capacity.

Significant investment in Northern Ireland's ageing water and wastewater networks, (most of which are now over 50 years old) is required urgently as the current funding is not keeping pace with Northern Ireland's needs. At its last PC15 (Price Control 2015 – 2021) NI Water set out that it needed £2.8bn for NI Water Infrastructure; the sum they received was £990m. As NI Water has set out its PC21 2021 – 2027, to keep up with Northern Ireland's needs; investment of £3.36bn will be required.

NI Water is owned by the government and can only spend within its Annual Public Expenditure budget. Capital expenditure is dictated by the Department for Infrastructure.

Funding is not keeping pace with Northern Ireland's needs. NI Water knows Northern Ireland's growth ambitions, it knows what needs to be done, has a plan in place and has the skills to deliver it. As highlighted by Ms Venning, if funding continues at current levels there will be significant constraints on economic growth, damage to the environment and risk to people's health.

In summing up, Ms Venning reiterated that NI Water's current governance model is broken, to date it hasn't delivered the investment that Northern Ireland needs. She asked Forum Members to communicate to their parties the critical and urgent funding required to update Northern Ireland's ageing infrastructure and the importance of a new Governance Model for NI Water.

NI Water launched their consultation on their Draft Strategy for the next 25 years on 25th September 2019. The closing date for responses to the consultation is 6th November 2019.

Following Ms Venning's presentation, questions were invited from the floor; a synopsis of the discussion which followed is summarised below:

Alderman Moutray thanked Ms Venning for her presentation, and congratulated Ms Venning on NI Water's success at being placed 2nd in the top 100 companies of Northern Ireland 2019. He asked Ms Venning, from today's presentation, the key messages she wants to be taken forward. In response Ms Venning commented that there are two key messages for Forum Members to communicate to their political parties:

1. Major and urgent investment is required to update NI Water's water and sewerage infrastructure
2. The need for a new governance model. NI Water's current governance model is broken and not delivering the investment Northern Ireland requires.

Councillor McKeown asked about the NI Water's investment requirements as set out in PC15 – 2021; £2.8bn requirement; 1.7bn to keep going; the sum received £990m. Ms Venning advised that 80% of the £990m is spent keeping things ticking over. There is no money for growth. Moy Park wanted to expand into Ballymena – Ballymena's waste water system does not have the capacity. In Dungannon, the waste treatment works almost fell over. If it does fall, it will pollute – it needs an upgrade urgently.

Councillor McFlynn commented on the significant housing stress and homelessness being experienced by people in Mid Ulster due to house building not keeping up with housing demand. New housing developments are being turned down by NI Water due to lack of upgrading wastewater treatment works and new water mains not being delivered upon.

Councillor McFlynn also enquired about the safety of pipes which are over 50 years old – is childrens' health being affected? Eg; there has been a spike in the number of children being diagnosed with autism. In response Ms Venning emphasised that providing safe, clean, drinking water to homes and businesses is always the top priority. Rigorous monitoring is undertaken by NI Water to assess public drinking water quality, and compliance is based on the results of key tests carried out throughout the water supply chain: from water treatment works to consumers' taps. Every year the Drinking Water Inspectorate publishes a report on drinking water quality.

Action: Sara Venning advised that she would provide a copy of the most recent Water Quality Report by the Drinking Water Inspectorate to the Forum.

Ann McCullough, Head of Planning, Ards and North Down Borough Council referred to the commitments made in Councils Local Development Plans and the risk to Councils planned development projects due to the NI Water infrastructure capacity issues as raised in today's presentation. In response Ms Venning advised that the Department for Infrastructure is working hard and considering all options – as yet we do not know what the solution is. NI Water's capital and resource budget comes from the block grant. We are asking the government to look at the rules. There is lots of money to borrow – the problem is, how do you pay it back? Rivers and seas will be polluted if we don't invest – we are at the tipping point. NI Water have called for the Department of Finance and Department for Infrastructure for expertise to find a way through this.

Cllr Matt Garrett commented that it was interesting to hear about the situation in other Council areas. Belfast has not found itself in that position yet. If NI Water decline connections due to capacity issues – the Council's aspirations and Local Development Plan will be hindered.

Following the discussion, Sara Venning thanked Members for their questions and comments and referred Members to the Elected Representative Hotline: 0345 300 6461. Ms Venning also advised that she would be communicating with all 11 Councils.

Action: NILGA will be developing a regional response with Councils to the NI Water Draft Strategy and would encourage Councils to respond.

Keynote Presentation 2 – Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Services

Michael Graham, Chief Fire and Rescue Officer and Alan Walmlsey, Assistant Chief Fire and Rescue Officer updated the Forum on the financial constraints currently being faced by the NIFRS (approximately £2.3 million financial pressure), and details of the Interim Service Delivery Model they have put in place, introduced from 12th August 2019.

NIFRS 2019 / 20 budget allocation is £74,147,643. To ensure services are planned, designed and delivered efficiently (while also remaining focused on community and firefighter safety) the interim Service Delivery Model has been introduced to try to manage the financial constraints the NIFRS is facing.

As of 12th August 2019, there are some stations which will operate with a nucleus crewing of 3 personnel, to be introduced at the following current day crewing stations – (Station strength will be reduced from 7 to 5 personnel); Carrickfergus Station, Enniskillen Station, Newtownards Station, Armagh Station, Omagh Station and Portadown Station.

As outlined in the Interim Service Delivery Model, the primary focus is on how to deliver Fire and Rescue Services on a regional basis; to shift the focus of attaching resource to stations; and into the community instead. On-call firefighters provide emergency fire and rescue services to their local communities around the clock.

The role of the NIFRS has evolved over the years. The number of call outs to fires has dropped significantly over the last 10 years. The Fire Service is now responding to different kinds of calls, including flooding incidents etc. In terms of “callouts”, 30 – 35% callouts happen between 8am – 6pm, Monday – Friday. 65% of callouts happen at the weekend.

One of the issues causing concern – is the amount of money being spent in overtime – and how the service can reduce to a point where the Service can breakdown. There are currently 805 fulltime firefighters and the Interim Service Delivery Plan sets out how to use 805 firefighters in the best way. The NIFRS are also currently recruiting for part-time / on-call Firefighters in 41 stations across Northern Ireland.

In summing up, Mr Graham advised that the NIFRS still have circa £2.3m of financial pressure; if additional funding is received in year, consideration will have to be given as

where it is best spent. Mr Graham added that the NIFRS are currently working with the Department on the development of a 5 year strategic and transformative programme.

Following the presentation by Michael Graham and Alan Walmsley, the floor was opened to questions. A synopsis of the discussion which followed is provided in the paragraphs below:

Alderman Billy Ashe MBE thanked Michael Graham and Alan Walmsley for their presentation today and highlighted the importance of liaising with all Councils about the issues raised today.

Action: Michael Graham advised that NIFRS would be engaging with Councils over the coming weeks to update Councils on changes to the operational model and proposed plans moving forward.

Cllr Christine McFlynn commented that she would not want to see NIFRS services reduced in the Mid Ulster Council area which runs 53 miles from one end to the other. Cllr McFlynn also welcomed the new firefighting training facility which was opened in Desertcreat, Cookstown on 10th September 2019.

In terms of provision of service, Mr Graham advised that the approach being taken via the interim delivery model is to deliver fire and rescue services on a regional basis; shifting the focus of attaching resource to stations; and into communities instead.

Issues to be addressed at future meetings of the Central Local Government Political Partnership Forum

Mid Ulster Council have raised two issues to be discussed at future meetings of the Central – Local Government Forum:

- (i) Enhanced Health Care – NILGA will seek representation from the Department of Health and Social Care Board for a regional discussion on the potential for improved health and care delivery across Northern Ireland and the Council role in public health to Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum.

Action: NILGA will seek representation from the Department of Health and the Health and Social Care Board to meet with Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum.

- (ii) Transportation & Rural Isolation –

Action: Initially this issue will be brought to NILGA Placeshaping and Infrastructure Policy and Learning Network for further development with the 11 Councils, and brought to a future meeting of the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum.

Action: A template for Councils will be circulated with this Outcome Note to communicate issues they wish to be raised at future meetings of the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum.

Maximising impact of broadband for small businesses and communities

Lisa O’Kane addressed the Forum. The current Project Stratum has raised negative concerns in the 11 Councils as it may not meet expectations in rural areas. The NILGA Office Bearers will be meeting with Noel Lavery, Permanent Secretary, DfE to raise regional concerns about the project and plan for future initiatives.

Action: Lisa O’Kane to provide an update on progress at next meeting.

Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum will take place on 31st January 2020, approximately 10am – 12 noon, in the NILGA Offices, Bradford Court, Castlereagh.

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