



**RESPONSE
NORTHERN IRELAND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION
DEVOLUTION IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Belfast City Council (the Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NILGA consultation on the NPI Report – Devolution in Northern Ireland.

The consultation had been considered by the Council's Strategic Policy and Resources (SP&R) Committee at its meeting on 19 October 2018 at which the following corporate response was agreed. This response will be presented to Full Council on 1 November 2018 and we will inform you of any changes that may emerge after this date.

GENERAL COMMENTS

- The Council agrees overall with the principles contained within the NPI report 'Devolution within Northern Ireland' and is supportive of the general conclusions and next steps as set out within the report.
- The devolution of **neighbourhood services** will allow for a more responsive approach to communities' needs and aspirations. Councils have a greater understanding and engagement with their local communities enabling the tailoring of services, improved decision-making and the delivery of local outcomes.
- **Recommend that Councils review those neighbourhood services listed where responsibility for delivery is shared between local government and the NICS or where responsibility is unclear.** Any case for devolution of specific services should be based on greater resource, clarity of purpose and should complement the outcomes based approach set out within the community plan. **A scoping exercise should be undertaken to ascertain which powers should be devolved.**
- The Council wish to stress the importance of the transfer of key **regeneration functions** during phase 2 of any devolution of powers to local government.
- The Council recommend that responsibility for the delivery of **employability and skills** initiatives may be further devolved from Departments to local government. While there is a range of activity taking place across Belfast, the pervasive challenges of long-term unemployment and economic inactivity have not been addressed in any real way. The Council would wish to explore how we can work with partners to use the information we have to plan better around skills needs and training provision to meet these needs with the objective of supporting **inclusive economic growth**.
- There may be a need to **fundamentally review local government finance** if a high degree of devolution was secured. In any case, the Council would seek assurances that the level of financial resources made available for devolution to NI councils was not only cost neutral at the point of transfer but also that councils would be indemnified against any potential future shortfall in funding through an extension of the "**New Burdens Doctrine**".

- Consideration should be given to the **devolution of greater powers in the context of City based local authorities and unitary or quasi-unitary status**. A longer-term transition plan would be required in relation to these types of authorities.
- Clearly there will be a role for NILGA in helping to develop political awareness and supporting political engagement/negotiation with central government and NI Executive regarding any future proposals for the devolution of powers in terms of ensuring that they fit-for-purpose and adequately resourced. It is important to recognise, however, that the **primacy rests with local government and councils to lead this process** with the support and advice of professional officers.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Set out below are some specific comments which the Council would wish to be considered in response to questions contained within the consultation.

Q1: In general, looking at principles and content, what is your council's overall view on the NPI report "Devolution within Northern Ireland"?

- That the Council agrees overall with the principles contained within the NPI report 'Devolution within Northern Ireland' and is supportive of the general conclusions and next steps as set out within the report.
- That the devolution of **neighbourhood services** will allow for a more responsive approach to communities' needs and aspirations. Councils have a greater understanding and engagement with their local communities enabling the tailoring of services, improved decision-making and the delivery of local outcomes.
- That Councils **review those neighbourhood services listed in Appendix 2 where responsibility for delivery is either i) shared between local government and the NICS or ii) where responsibility is unclear**. Any case for devolution of specific services should be based on greater resource, clarity of purpose and should complement the outcomes based approach set out within the community plan. **A scoping exercise should be undertaken to ascertain which powers should be devolved.**
- In addition to the devolution of neighbourhood services, the Council would also wish to stress the importance of the transfer of key **regeneration functions** during phase 2 of any devolution of powers to local government.
- The transfer of Comprehensive Development Powers and the ability to acquire land for regeneration purposes, when used alongside community and land use planning, would help to strengthen and enhance our ability to drive strategic regeneration activity, unlocking and realising the potential of major/flagship schemes and reinvigorating key areas in the city.
- The transfer of regeneration functions would provide the Council with the ability to:
 - ensure an integrated and outcome-based approach to regeneration
 - take a targeted approach to addressing blighted areas across the city including the City Centre
 - ensure greater alignment of physical regeneration with the emerging Local Development Plan

- enhance the vitality of the City Centre and further develop the rates base which is good for both Belfast and Northern Ireland Plc as it enables/supports further investment in front-line services
- effectively position Belfast as an investment location and attract significant inward investment
- The Council would also recommend that responsibility for the delivery of **employability and skills** initiatives may be further devolved from Departments to local government. While there is a range of activity taking place across Belfast, the pervasive challenges of long-term unemployment and economic inactivity have not been addressed in any real way.
- The Council would suggest that greater collaboration is required between local government and government departments, in the planning, development, delivery and monitoring of interventions in order to increase their effectiveness for Belfast residents and, in turn, create a more cohesive society. As the planning authority, the city council is now in receipt of significant intelligence regarding future employment opportunities at key developments.
- The Council would wish to explore how we can work with partners to use this information to plan better around skills needs and training provision to meet these needs with the objective of supporting inclusive economic growth.
- An outcomes based approach is essential to driving our approach to ensure that residents receive the best outcomes and services.
- **Community planning** is a first step towards this and the learning from the experience of Local Government reform and the transfer of some powers should be harnessed to enable Council's to progress a place-based approach.
- Consideration should be given to the devolution of greater powers in the context of City based local authorities and unitary or quasi-unitary status. A longer term transition plan would be required in relation to these types of authorities.
- The Council would support the adoption of a **place-based approach to growth** and would reference the UK Industrial Strategy which seeks to further reinforce and strengthen the role of cities and localities in driving growth through a strong devolution agenda. This permeates through the UK Strategy and explicitly includes a commitment to explore 'further devolution deals for our largest cities' where they will increase economic growth and ongoing work with Scottish and Welsh cities to secure **City Deals**.
- The draft NI strategy Economy 2030 acknowledges the need for a step-change in business start-up and productivity performance for the region's economic success and the Council is keen to work with government and other delivery partners to develop targeted approaches to deliver against agreed targets, and to avoid duplication to provide a comprehensive pipeline of support for business start-up and growth, entrepreneurship and innovation.

Q2: What are your Council's comments regarding the "potential for local government in Northern Ireland", as per pages 6 and 7 of the NPI report?

- The Council notes the conclusions reached in the NPI report that the main potential for local government in Northern Ireland rests in 'economic affairs', 'housing and community amenities' and the catch all of 'general public services'.

- NILGA will be aware that Belfast City Council are working with five other local councils on the delivery of a **Belfast Region City Deal**. Economic geographies can create the conditions to unlock future growth potential within the city-region, help deliver economic growth, transform public services and close the gap on inequalities.
- The Belfast Region City Deal represents a real opportunity for local government to work in partnership with the Executive and Treasury to secure necessary funding, including the ability of councils to borrow against growth, to plug deficits in key infrastructure and to bring forward key regeneration development schemes.
- Consideration should be given to the devolution of greater powers in the context of City based local authorities and unitary or quasi-unitary status. A longer-term transition plan would be required in relation to these types of authorities.

Q3: What are your council's comments regarding the premise of devolving neighbourhood services to councils in Northern Ireland, as per pages 13 and 14 of the report?

- Council are supportive and desire the **devolution of neighbourhood services** and powers to the city. This is evidenced by the application of the Belfast Regional City Deal to enable the city and surrounding local councils to have greater decision making and direction of the resources available to them.
- Belfast city council is currently undertaking a transformative approach to enable the delivery of its own services within an area-based model of service delivery and place shaping, to ensure the delivery of better outcomes for residents.
- The Council believes that devolution of neighbourhood services will allow for a more responsive approach to communities' needs and aspirations. Councils have a greater understanding and engagement with their local communities enabling the tailoring of services, improved decision-making and the delivery of local outcomes. This should lead to greater effectiveness and efficiency of services.
- As mentioned in the paper councils are both 'doers and enablers', delivering services and providing Member-led civic leadership to drive the collaboration and participation of others. This has been enhanced through the new community planning duty and would only increase with further devolution of neighbourhood services.
- The devolution of additional neighbourhood services would allow for a greater joined up approach to emergency and joint service planning both within Belfast but also allow for more effective continued cross-council working with neighbouring councils.
- A scoping exercise should be undertaken to ascertain which powers should be devolved.

Q4: The appendices to the report expand on what are considered to be neighbourhood services. If your council has any particularly strong views about individual services that you believe should or should not be included in this process, please comment below:

- The Council are content with the list of neighbourhood services contained within the NPI Report.

Q5: What are your views on how a drive for devolution of neighbourhood services and / or other powers & services could be materially linked to the programme for government, council community plans and the aspirations of councils for their ratepayers and their districts?

- The Council would highlight the complementarity between the ambitions set out within the Programme for Government and the Belfast Agenda and emphasise the importance of working in partnership with the Executive to co-design placed-based programmes and initiatives which deliver common outcomes.
- The Council recommend that a review is carried out as part of any further devolution of powers and services to local government, aimed at strengthening the obligations placed upon Departments and Community Planning partners to both participate and realign funding streams alongside the agreed outcomes within the community plan. This will reinforce the links between the Community Plan and the emerging Programme for Government and will enable a more joined up approach to governing Northern Ireland as a whole.
- The Council would recommend that there is a commitment within the Programme for Government to transfer important place-shaping regeneration functions, which complement the existing planning, and economic development functions of councils. If Belfast and Northern Ireland are to remain competitive and continue to attract investment, it is important that we can respond to the needs and demands of potential investors.
- Experience has shown that such investors are seeking a one-stop shop approach to bringing forward development schemes in liaison with local councils instead of having to engage with multiple agencies.
- The Council would outline the need to consider innovative and new forms of finance and delivery models to unlock development, regeneration and infrastructure priorities within the city and across the region.

Q6: What are your comments regarding the six recommendations as per the conclusion and practical next steps section of the report (pages 17 and 18)?

- The Council are broadly in agreement with each of the six recommendations outlined in the conclusion and next steps section of the report.
- With regards to recommendation 1, the Council would add that it is imperative that each individual council (with the overarching support of NILGA) be provided with the platform to lead in the Review of Local Governance process along with the Secretary of State, the NI Executive and the NICS Central Government Departments to reach a consensus on future devolution.
- The Belfast Agenda can help the Council to identify the executive powers over neighbourhood services that will think will best support the different outcomes those powers can be expected to deliver to local communities. The NPI paper states that community and business groups have a large part to play in forming this view and therefore this is a task best led by local government who have overall responsibility for the development and management of the Community Plan.
- With regards to Recommendation 4, the Council would recommend that consideration should be given to the devolution of greater powers in the context of City based local authorities and unitary or quasi-unitary status. A longer term transition plan would be required in relation to these types of authorities.

- The Council would also be particularly supportive of recommendation 5. However, there may be a need to fundamentally review local government finance if a high degree of devolution was secured. In any case, the Council would seek assurances that the level of financial resources made available for devolution to NI councils was not only adequate but that councils are indemnified against any potential shortfall through appropriate “New Burdens” or similar legislation.
- The Council agree with recommendation 6 that the draft Programme for Government mechanisms should factor in ‘successor activity’, in terms of budgetary, strategic and governance activity, to foster greater executive and scrutiny roles for councils in the medium and long term.

Q7: What are your views regarding the “illustrative timeline” template, also provided?

- The Council are content with the illustrative timeline but are aware that there is potential for slippage due to the lack of an operating Executive and NI Assembly.
- The Council recommend that local government are consulted with as early as possible and are involved at every stage of the development of any policy positions and emerging legislative provisions in respect of any functions or powers potentially being devolved to local government.
- Consideration should be given to the devolution of greater powers in the context of City based local authorities and unitary or quasi-unitary status. A longer-term transition plan would be required in relation to these types of authorities.

Q8: What does the council think would be necessary to have in place to underpin any future transfer of responsibilities (including the types of mechanisms needed to bring such responsibilities from concept to reality)?

- Clearly there will be a role for NILGA in helping to develop political awareness and supporting political engagement/negotiation with central government and NI Executive regarding any future proposals for the devolution of powers in terms of ensuring that they fit-for-purpose and adequately resourced. It is important to recognise, however, that the primacy rests with local government and councils to lead this process with the support and advice of professional officers.
- Where necessary the Council would recommend that structures are put in place to ensure that each of the 11 councils are engaged in the development of any policy positions and are consulted on all enabling legislation as early and as fully as possible.
- The Council would also be supportive of the need to ensure that there is a collectively agreed principle that Government as a whole will ensure that new burdens falling on local councils in Northern Ireland are fully funded.
- It will be vital that a detailed understanding of the amount of resources to be transferred to local government is reached and agreed upon, that a transparent process is developed to provide for the transfer of such resources at the appropriate time. This is very pertinent when seen in the context of the still outstanding issue of the retrospective funds offered to councils in relation to Off Street Car Parking.