

National Association of Councillors NI Region Forward Planning Day and Consultation

27 September 2022



Outcomes Report

D McCallan, Preparation, Facilitation and Draft Outcomes Report

1. Introduction

The NAC NI Executive Committee agreed to deliver, for and with its membership, a Forward Planning Day and associated Outcomes Paper, to materially guide the sustainable delivery of its Vision, Aims and Actions in advance of the May 2023 Local Government elections and for the subsequent four-year term.

A full day, interactive, strategic workshop with NAC NI members and a key partner organisation, NILGA, took place on Tuesday 27th September 2022 in the Glenavon Hotel, Cookstown, with input also enabled virtually for online participants (see attendance list on Page 10). This took the form of three distinct elements, as per Appendix A, which provides the comprehensive context, participative toolkit and presentation materials as prepared and delivered by Derek McCallan, independent local government specialist, who also completed this Outcome Paper in final draft form for communication to the NAC NI membership and ultimately subject to desired revisions for the formal approval of its Executive Committee.



2. Key Objectives of the Day & Consultation

- To ensure that the NAC NI is sustainable now and in the electoral term 2023-2026;
- To complete and action an Outcome Paper as a strategic and operational planning and action tool, which will guide NAC NI going forward and be a sister document to the new constitution now being developed.
- To enable dedicated forward planning for and with NAC NI members in a professional, personable environment allowing for frank, open discussion between all in attendance, with key additional insights and support from the NAC UK and NILGA as principal strategic and joint service partners.
- To ensure that the values, governance, resource requirements, purpose and work of the NAC NI are effectively communicated and understood by its membership and its partner organisations.

3. Workshop Summary

- (i) NAC NI is respectfully asked to consider this section and section 4. below in parallel with Appendix B, which provides in detail the sequenced, three-part, framework for and content of the workshop. The mechanisms used to enable discussion are also presented, with such discussion being reflected as far as reasonably possible in 3 and 4.
- (ii) At the outset, the author wishes to expressly acknowledge the extremely high degree of participation exhibited by participants, the enthusiasm and diverse insights / comments provided by very many members, and the patience, good humour and professionalism of each and every councillor and partner colleague on the day. There was an exceptional retention of over 95% of attendees for the duration (10.00–15.15) of the workshop. This is testimony to the importance placed by all those present of NAC NI's sustainability into the future.



4. Workshop Session One (10.00 – 11.15)

This session provided scene setting and initially concentrated on the fiscal, societal and political environment in which the NAC NI exists both here and now and into the future. Members both online and in situ highlighted the “backdrop and material issues” which NAC NI and local government more widely is operating in and dealing with. These included substantial financial pressures such as rising interest and mortgage rates, inflation, energy and other essential services costs and the weak £. Members reflected on these matters as representatives of their constituents as well as NAC corporately, in the latter case as regards the lobbying which the organisation and its partners could do to help alleviate as far as reasonably possible the budgetary pressures faced by so many.

Finding policy solutions to the above was aligned to strong comments from members in regard to the political impasse at Stormont, with the view expressed that “councils are and always have been a constant” and that “councillors were at the forefront of both the pressures and finding solutions for them”.

Members also clearly expressed their concerns in regard to diminished budgets for community safety, together with navigating the health system, which was for many constituents and councillors a major concern whilst recognising the care and dedication of so many in the NHS. Again, in the context of the NAC NI, the work to alleviate elected member stress due to a “24/7 open door” philosophy of many councillors, plus social media abuse, was considered vital moving ahead, in regard to Councillor Well-being – both existing and potential councillors need this collective practical reassurance that resources and policies are in place. Members also reflected passionately and professionally on the budget pressures faced by councils – including rates setting and delivering core services whilst also doing discretionary services which other government departments and agencies should be doing.



The local economy and future skills and employment initiatives to ensure young people are in work and don't emigrate were highlighted, with NAC & NILGA lobbying/training being considered important going forward. Vitally also, lobbying at local, regional and national government levels was considered a mission critical in regard to climate change and sustaining future generations.

Following, members again robustly engaged in regard to the value of the NAC NI, with participants expressing full support for the present Unique Selling Point of the organisation, exclusive to NI, namely that:

“(NAC NI) is the only organisation run by Northern Ireland Councillors to represent their interests. NAC NI provides information, advice, and an All-Party voice on matters relevant to the Councillor role. All 462 Councillors in Northern Ireland are Members of the NAC NI through Corporate Membership subscribed to by the eleven councils.”

Members were invited to develop comments that would help forward planning for NAC NI in relation to how it could assist elected members deal with their “multi-tasking, 24/7, non-stop roles”. Positive elements of being a councillor included “being a servant of all and wanting to help everyone”, “coming together and working together like this”, “taking up the learning and training courses which used not to be provided but now are”, together with the assets and functions councils now have such as Community Planning (“the People’s Manifesto”).

An appetite was expressed by three members (and others in written comment) for more powers through targeted devolution, with several comments on the instability of Stormont and its departments aligned to this. One member explained that “on the doorstep, the public don’t get the difference between councillors and MLAs, meaning we (councillors) get the blame.”

Going forward, a clear communication message as regards the value and roles of councillors/councils was seen as a necessity, part of which could be supported by and materially include NAC NI, mindful that such campaigns have taken place before, such as during the Review of Public Administration (2015) and Local government elections (2019).

Additionally, members talked about the importance of being supportive of and participating in bodies like NAC NI and NILGA, with one member noting that negative voices shout the loudest but must be drowned out by the solutions oriented, hardworking, silent majority: “the wind section (of the orchestra) is too loud.”

Finally, as regards the first session, full support for practical partnership and joint working was expressed, including with NILGA, the Department for Communities, councils themselves and partner bodies in Ireland and Britain. Members clearly asserted that that NAC NI aims and mission – including on the immediate horizon the Councillor Code of Conduct, constitutional reform, remuneration of councillors – particularly lobbying for an independent, evidence-based review of terms and conditions, akin to the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) successful campaign - would ALL be more achievable with many voices working in tandem.

5. Workshop Session Two (11.30 – 13.15)

Participants moved from a collective participation approach to six (five in situ, one virtual) break out sessions in order to comprehensively provide written response to seven **Forward Planning** questions per below (with *summary* responses underneath each, noting well that answers to questions are abridged and inevitably overlapped across more than one):

(i) **NAC Milestones in first thirty years?**

- Every member can get NAC NI support
- local government reform including retirement packages, pension availability
- removing tax on mileage
- very strong and successful partnerships
- campaigning, e.g., Code of Conduct

- lobbying, learning & development/training now a budget for same
- networking and talking to each other,
- representing councillors within N Ireland (such as within the Partnership Panel) and further afield (such as NAC UK, AILG and LAMA).

(ii) A Look Ahead: What MUST THE NAC prioritise as its own core actions? Anything it SHOULDN'T DO?

- Funding, budgets and resources for councillors: lobby in partnership but NAC lead/priority
- Terms and conditions – councillors need administrative/member & democratic services support enhanced due to 24/7 roles
- Clearly communicating the value of councillors and their distinctive, diverse roles
- Remuneration review – independent and Ministerially approved
- Wellbeing, anti-harassment and anti-bullying enhanced work
- Post pandemic work at home changes – let's embed these with proper & consistent allowances and equipment,
- Support others work, e.g., NILGA/SOLACE but don't duplicate it (understand what they do better)
- Consistent and fair core terms and conditions whether for technology, other equipment, annual allowances, etc., Departmentally determined as opposed to via individual council annual voting
- New member marketing and communication in 2023
- Obtain evidence-based data, e.g., on councillors' core (rising) expenditures/costs versus what their remuneration is (linked to independent review)
- Support devolution below Stormont and proper plan for same
- Long Service Awards & Conferences showing best practice councillors at work

(iii) Looking at (ii). above and other key actions, list some PARTNERSHIP/COLLABORATIVE work and with what bodies?

- Learning, development and training with NILGA – including having Peer mentor councillors to be impartial advisers to new recruits or others seeking advice
- Resources from and representation in Local Government Training Group
- Strategic input and partnership with NILGA, APSE, AILG, LAMA, NAC UK,
- Representative NAC NI role with DfC (Partnership Panel)

(iv) And how about some NAC and/or wider LG changes – big or small – that would make an impact?

- Councillor equality review with DfC
- More councillors encouraged to get involved with outside bodies and spread the responsibility/benefit
- Fees and subscriptions across An electoral term of four years not an annual vote
- Values and benefits – regular 2-way communication using modern and appropriate channels including TikTok and blogs
- Communicate more forcefully and regularly with Ministers on recognition of councillors and councillors

- Managed transfer of powers linked to councillor recognition, remuneration and performance (evidence-based lobbying)
- Consider restoring the Roadshow across councils (done before)
- Councillor Hotline for Local Government and departmental services (e.g., Department for Infrastructure and Housing Executive Committee)

(v) NAC's Constitution is presently being formally looked at. Broadly (officers, board, party and independent proportionality, meeting structure) is the present operating system fit for the future?

- Governance is fit for future and constitutional reform will create Party proportionality on Executive Committee according to electoral strength, also young members and female members weighted approach
- Communicating in modern high impact ways and hybrid meetings means more buy in and accessible input into NAC NI

(vi) Money, people, resources – broadly okay or not/partnership opportunities?

- For training – LGTG resources with NILGA co-ordinating
- Use some budget for action research like this event and to support surveys on councillor welfare and costs of living
- Collaborative resources – joint conferencing with NILGA and NILGA/NAC doing joint admin if appropriate topics for events

(vii) What should NAC communicate to the new intake of 462 members, summary and priority wise, how should it communicate and how frequently?

- Values and benefits of NAC NI “Who are we? What do we do? How do we do it? WHY the NAC is vital to every councillor?”
- Always here for you, all of you
- Consider restoring the Roadshow across councils (done before)
- Campaign videos e.g., to share views on revising the Code of Conduct, here is how...
- New members and returned members – Induction participation by NAC NI and contribute strongly to the new Councillors’ Guide (2023)
- NAC represents all local councillors and all our voices (NAC = CAN)



6. Workshop Session Three (14.00 – 15.15)

Participants reconvened and recapped on what was determined in both earlier sessions as regards priorities and planning between now and May 2023 and the period immediately after the election. New learning and ideas had come forward but the core values and aims of the NAC NI remain relevant, the messaging of these and adapting how the NAC delivers these core values and aims is within the gift of those in the NAC NI Executive Committee and its partner organisations.

The value of a “key family member” – the strategic partner NILGA, was then developed, with Alison Allen, NILGA Chief Executive Committee, giving a clear summary of the DISTINCT roles driven and delivered by NILGA. She then clearly articulated where string partnership with NAC NI would deliver results, referencing several successful joint initiatives and eliciting some new areas of strategic partnership.

Participants endorsed the importance of the strategic partnership with NILGA now and in the future, and several members highlighted the joint frustration sometimes shared by both NILGA and NAC when things outside their direct control led to delays, bureaucracy and even things just not getting done despite vehement pressure and evidence provided. The NILGA CE referenced how it was vital that both bodies worked together and with SOLACE as the three NI regional bodies for local councils to ensure that there should be “no closed doors” to better public service for all in the region.

The facilitator recognised the overwhelmingly positive and participative work engaged in by online and in situ members and partner colleagues to ensure that the day was as through yet enjoyable as possible. The NAC Chair recognised and thanked all those who enabled the event, including staff in NAC NI, NILGA, the technology support and the hotel team. Before drawing the event to a close, he called upon short reflections from Councillors Anne Bonner and Brian Nelson of NAC UK, who collectively referenced the learning they had experienced and the fellowship, remarking that NAC NI was an exemplary organisation that led the way.



7. Practical Next Steps/Conclusion

This Outcomes Report was forwarded to the NAC NI Executive Committee in DRAFT form by Derek McCallan, Conference Facilitator. As requested, it was then refined and added to, to ensure accuracy and added value, with some photography of the workshop inserted for ownership and visual appeal as a strategic, working document.



It was recommended that the Outcomes Report, after review by the NAC NI's Executive Committee, should be distributed for feedback to or validation and noting by its membership, with any feedback sought within a maximum of FIVE WORKING DAYS, mindful that a thorough and representative workshop has formed a strong and clear framework for a way forward.

It was further recommended that the final version, after corporate review, of the NAC NI Outcomes Report is considered for approval and action at the next NAC NI Members' Meeting.



**Prepared/submitted without prejudice, and upon receipt without liability in good faith by the author/facilitator as a guidance document only for NAC NI.
Derek McCallan, 28th September 2022.**

**Amended and approved with photography and Attendee List added.
NAC Executive Committee, December 2022.**

Circulated to all NAC Members on 3rd January 2023 for approval, approved at the NAC Members' Meeting on 25th January 2023.

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNCILLORS
NI REGION CONFERENCE**

27 SEPTEMBER 2022

ATTENDEE LIST

**Glenavon House Hotel
Cookstown**

Council	Title	First	Last Name
A&NTA	Cllr	Alison	Bennington
A&NTA	Cllr	Billy	Webb
AND	Cllr	Joe	Boyle
AND	Ald	Bill	Keery
AND	Ald	Alan	McDowell
AND	Cllr	Eddie	Thompson
ABC	Cllr	Eamon	McNeill
ABC	Ald	Stephen	Moutray
DC&S	Ald	Derek	Hussey
DC&S	Ald	Keith	Kerrigan
F&O	Cllr	Errol	Thompson
LCCC	Cllr	Hazel	Legge
LCCC	Ald	Michael	Henderson
M&EA	Cllr	Beth	Adger
M&EA	Cllr	Eugene	Reid
M&EA	Ald	Tommy	Nicholl
MU	Cllr	Martin	Kearney
MU	Cllr	Christine	McFlynn
MU	Cllr	Frances	Burton
NMD	Cllr	Terry	Andrews
NMD	Cllr	Charlie	Casey
NMD	Cllr	Valerie	Harte
NMD	Cllr	Robert	Burgess
NMD	Cllr	Dermot	Curran
NAC UK	Cllr	Brian	Nelson
NAC UK	Cllr	Anne	Bonner

On-Line by Zoom

Council	Title	First	Last Name
A&NTA	Cllr	Anne Marie	Logue
CC&G	Cllr	Dermot	Nicholl
F&O	Ald	Allan	Rainey
F&O	Cllr	Donal	O'Cofaigh
LCCC	Ald	Stephen	Martin
MU	Cllr	Sean	McGuigan

Organisation Team

Facilitator	Mr	Derek	McCallan
NILGA	Ms	Alison	Allen
NILGA	Ms	Sarah	Little
NAC	Ms	Kate	Wilson

Apologies Received

AND	Ald	Deborah	Girvan
BCC	Cllr	Tracy	Kelly
BCC	Ald	Jim	Rodgers
BCC	Ald	Tommy	Sandford
CC&G	Ald	Joan	Baird
LCCC	Cllr	Fiona	Cole
LCCC	Ald	David	Drysdale
LCCC	Cllr	Alex	Swann
M&EA	Ald	Noel	Williams
MU	Cllr	Niamh	Doris

