



National Association of Councillors
Northern Ireland Region



BY EMAIL

TO: ALL NAC NI REGION MEMBERS

FROM: THE NAC NI EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (EC)

SUBJECT: REVIEW OF THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF COUNCILLORS

DATE: 7 June 2022

The NAC EC have produced this document to provide members with an update on the process that we are currently engaged in, with the Department for Communities, in relation to a Review of the Roles and Responsibilities of Councillors.

Background

Councillors in Northern Ireland are now in the final year of their second term of office under the new Local Government structures, following the reorganisation in April 2015 that reduced the number of Councils from 26 to 11.

Our members have dealt with many challenges both during and since this implementation, which involved the transfer of some central government functions and created new powers and responsibilities for Local Government and Elected Members.

From 2017 to 2020 Northern Ireland Councillors' work was seriously impacted upon by the breakdown of the Northern Ireland Assembly, whereby issues raised by Councillors could not be addressed or resolved without a Department for Communities Minister in place to make decisions. During this period, the EC wrote to Secretaries of State and Permanent Secretaries on various issues but received the same response, that these were matters for our Devolved Government.

As the only representative body for 462 Councillors within Northern Ireland, the EC was tasked by our members to seek a review of all aspects concerning the role of a Councillor.

Objectives

The NAC NI Region, EC has been representing our members in seeking:

- 1) ***To have Councillors' working conditions aligned to ensure equality for all elected members, across all Councils.***
- 2) ***To have the Councillors allowances and benefits structure re-evaluated so that it is comparative to the provisions that are in place for other NI Public Representatives.***

These objectives were drawn up in response to issues that NAC NI Members have raised over the past 6 years, particularly around uniformity across Councils in relation to the resources, materials and benefits that are provided to Councillors to enable them to carry out their role; and in relation to the disparity between Councillors allowances and that of Members of the NI Assembly, Members of Parliament, and their staff.



Objective 1

To have Councillors' working conditions aligned to ensure equality for all elected members, across all Councils.

Whilst it is recognised that some Councils may be supporting their Councillors well, there are extreme variances. It is felt that clear direction should be provided so that there is equality across Councils. Items suggested for inclusion are:

- Secretarial support, office facilities, equipment and stationery supplies deemed necessary to carry out Councillor duties.
- Insurance for Councillors to cover legal costs in relation to malicious Code of Conduct claims and press/social media reports/posts.
- Ongoing training to assist additional requirements such as sitting on Planning Committees, dealing with social media abuse, operating under the Code of Conduct etc. and to include a personal training allowance.
- Support with mental health problems that are in relation to the work being carried out.

Objective 2

To have the Councillors' allowances and benefits structure re-evaluated so that it is comparative to the provisions that are in place for other Northern Ireland Elected Representatives.

A review of the role of Councillors had been envisaged since the implementation of the Review of Public Administration involving the reduction from the 26 Councils to that of the 11-Council model.

For many years Councillors have felt that their work has been undervalued in relation to the work of MLAs and MPs. Councillors' allowances and pension entitlements are a great deal lower, and there are no ongoing severance arrangements. Suggestions put forward include:

- A review, to be carried out by an external body within a six-month period
- Commitment for the implementation of any recommended review
- Provision of an ongoing Severance Scheme for all departing Councillors
- Higher pension contributions from Councils by raising the percentage amount
- A scheme to make provision for Councillors who require extended periods of leave due to maternity, paternity, or sickness



National Association of Councillors Northern Ireland Region

Update

During 2018/19 the EC met with and/or corresponded with the Local Government Spokespersons from the main political parties and gained their support, we also have the support of NILGA. When the Assembly resumed in 2020, the EC put forward meeting requests to the DfC Minister(s) and the NI Assembly Committee for Communities.

These were difficult times to get meetings due to COVID-19 however, the EC presented the foregoing facts to DfC Officials in February 2021 and a document containing this information was forwarded to the NI Assembly Committee for Communities in March 2021 requesting a meeting with the aim of progressing a review. The NI Assembly Committee have not yet met with us; however, an excellent working relationship has been formed with Minister Hargey MLA and her most senior Officials with several meetings having taken place during a 6-month period late 2021 and early 2022.

The result of this is that Minister Hargey has agreed that an independently led review of the roles and responsibilities of Councillors is timely, and her Officials have drafted a Terms of Reference document with a view to progressing this. When approved by the Minister a working group consisting of members from various organisations including NAC and NILGA representatives will be appointed to take forward the review.

This information is available on the [NAC Website](#), updates are communicated to NAC Members' Delegates at our bi-monthly meetings and the minutes from these meetings are published on our website, we also provide details in the NAC Newsletters that are sent to all Members.

Footnote

The NAC NI Region is the only organisation that is run by Councillors to represent the interests of Local Government Elected Members from all parties and none, across the region. We aim to assist and support Councillors by providing advice, training and regular forums where information and experiences, in relation to the Councillor role, can be discussed and shared.

Each Council can nominate up to eight NAC Delegates and all are then invited to attend meetings and can be nominated to sit on the EC at our AGMs. All Members can attend meetings by sending an email request, the dates and details are on the [Meetings Page](#) of our website.

We rely on the continued support of our members and encourage all Members to engage and/or get actively involved. Please share our details with your party and/or Council colleagues so that we can grow our Councillor Family, as through working together we are stronger.

THE NAC NI EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (EC)