



**DRAFT RESPONSE**

**NORTHERN IRELAND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION**

**TRANSFORMATION AND DRIVING PRACTICAL CHANGE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Belfast City Council (the Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NILGA consultation on Transformation and Driving Practical Change in Local Government.

**GENERAL COMMENTS**

The Council believe that this is an important and timely piece of work given that five years has passed since the 2015 local government reform programme. We have also experienced the impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic, and the unprecedented impacts that this has placed on society as a whole, and on local government and the future sustainability of local councils.

This engagement exercise presents a real opportunity for local government, as a cohesive sector, to coalesce and create a common agenda which will help inform, influence and establish a strong collegiate position.

Local government reforms that came into effect in April 2015 significantly shifted the role of local government towards one of active place-shaping. These arrangements provided councils with greater responsibility for important powers such as spatial and land-use planning, off-street car parks, local economic development and tourism. However, a residual sense exists across local government that the powers which transferred to councils did not go far enough. It is our position that this could be addressed by implementation of a second tranche of reform.

Further devolution of core place-shaping functions will allow for a more responsive approach to communities' needs and aspirations. Councils have a greater understanding of, and engagement with, their local communities enabling the tailoring of services, improved decision-making and the delivery of local outcomes.

However, given the previous experience of the 2015 reform programme, we must emphasise the importance that if there is to be any further devolution of powers to local government

this must be supported by greater resource, clarity of purpose and occur in a planned and phased manner to ensure continuity and certainty for all stakeholders.

In summary the main issues relating to the future role of local government that the Council wish to highlight include:

- **Central government commitment to work in partnership with local councils, by providing the necessary funding and policy backdrop, from which councils can play a leading role in the sustainable recovery of their local areas;**
- **enhanced devolution to local government including regeneration, planning, skills investment and planning, and local transport planning;**
- **greater powers regarding local taxation measures and enhanced local investment powers, to ensure that that councils have the fiscal levers to tackle issues at community and city level; and**
- **the introduction of legislation/measures that strengthen the relationship between central and local government, including a duty to collaborate to provide for responsive and integrated service delivery at regional, city and community level.**

These issues are discussed in detail in this our submission and our responses to the questions posed.

- 1. Covid 19 to date – please highlight the biggest sustainability, strategic and operational issues *facing Council going into 2021*, as triggered primarily by Covid 19. Additionally, how might some or all of these be alleviated by further legislation, policy and/or resource changes in wider government? Council can send additional materials to augment the synopsis presented here.**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has obviously caused massive economic disruption for Belfast, along with the rest of the NI, UK and the world at large. The council have welcomed the range of support measures and interventions that the NI Assembly have put in place to date to help mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 and to minimise economic and financial disruption.

While we continue to provide critical support to local communities, businesses and the local economy through this Pandemic this ongoing situation has highlighted significant and stark sustainability, strategic and operational issues for the council in moving forward.

The issues set out below relating to finance, place and sustainability provide an overview of the concerns which the council face going into 2021 and beyond. It is the view of this council that without further funding, based on continued Barnett consequentials and remodelling how local government is financed in future years the future outlook for local communities, workforce and service delivery is bleak.

### **Finance (loss of rates and income)**

Typically, 75% of a council's income comes from rates. The other 25% of income (grants, rents and fees & charges) has been significantly lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic which has impacted on ability to deliver services.

All councils are experiencing significant impacts on their rates and income base and they are not in a position to compensate for this loss without cutting back on essential services. This has been recognised by the Department for Communities with a series of funding packages brought forward to supplement some of the losses incurred. These packages must continue, and a constructive dialogue and shared diligence between councils and central government must continue. The public health restrictions which have been required to manage Covid-19 has resulted in business closures in key sectors as well as key visitor and recreational facilities

of councils and has had real economic impacts on this council's finances and ability to sustain important services.

In addition to loss of income, the council has also experienced additional costs as a result of Covid-19 and ensuring appropriate social distancing and safety measures are in place. Councils have also played a critical role in providing exceptional support for local communities and businesses and have had to dedicate significant resource to support vulnerable individuals and families, administer government grants and provide forums for engagement with local businesses, across the city.

The council is particularly concerned that these reductions in income and increased costs are likely to continue into the next number of years. While it is appreciated that efficiency measures will be needed, the most critical concern is the impact that vacancy levels (due to failure of business) will have on the rates income which provides the core element (70-80 %) of our budget. If this is significantly reduced, the council will struggle to provide the services our citizens require and expect.

To address these issues, the council believe that the NI Executive needs to guarantee sustainable level of rates income for the next three years as a minimum. This guarantee will need to be supported by councils undertaking significant exercises to identify and make savings, to also meet the losses that they will continue to suffer from their commercial activities.

### **Impact on Place**

The prolonged and uncertain nature of the pandemic and the range of measures and restrictions brought forward has had a devastating impact upon the vitality and functionality of businesses and city/town centres across Northern Ireland. Whilst the uptake of financial support schemes for businesses across all sectors of the economy has been high, many businesses have been faced with closure, significant losses in revenue and disruptions to their cash flow. The scale of impact on the tourism, arts, entertainment and hospitality sectors – key economic sectors and employment drivers - is significant and the future viability of the high street and retail and hospitality is at risk with decreased levels of footfall resulting from safety concerns, social distance measures as well lack of tourists and the shift from office-based to home-working.

## **Investing in sustainable recovery**

This council has and will continue to proactively bring forward measures to mitigate the social and economic effects, across the city, of the Covid-19 crisis on people, jobs, businesses and the local economy. It will be important that central and local government work together with communities, businesses and partners to assess the longer-term impact of the pandemic and on local economies and society.

In relation to a recovery plans for Belfast, the council recognise the need for a two-pronged approach of immediate interventions and support during the current pandemic, as well as building important foundations and identifying key levers to support medium-longer term recovery.

Given the scale and complexity of the challenges we face, it will be important that we work in partnership and bring forward financial support and other policy instruments to help rebuild and stimulate recovery, recognising that businesses/councils have limited cash flow to allocate to planning, administration or match funding arrangements at this time.

Examples of opportunities to support future recovery include:

- Accelerating City & Growth Deals to secure investment, creating jobs and acting as a catalyst for supporting recovery.
- Support and investment in local skills programmes and employability schemes, working with local employers, further and higher education and training providers, so that local skills supply can better match future demand. This is also a key area where there needs to be a new relationship between central and local government, both in designing the new skills strategy and in developing local funding strategies and programmes.
- Investing in communities, creating local assets and facilities and building community capacity and resilience.
- Investing in the revitalisation of our high streets and town centres to support key sectors of the economy, provide economic stability and sustain jobs.

- Maximising the opportunities presented through digital innovation to support key growth sectors, repositioning the economy and enhancing skills and employability.
- Investing in green stimulus as a key driver for economic recovery, with the potential for Northern Ireland to be at the forefront of innovation and clean growth.
- Investing in local regeneration programmes to support business growth and promote and secure FDI and real estate investment.

**Q2: RPA to date (new councils since 2015) – please highlight at least two major corporate successes for your Council that RPA has triggered and at least two barriers to success which might be overcome by further legislation, policy and/or resource changes in wider government.**

As suggested within general comments on page 1 the local government reform programme has assisted the council in terms of successful delivery in some areas. However, it has by no means removed all barriers by which councils deliver for its citizens and communities.

Two major corporate successes related to the local government reform programme have been:

#### **Belfast Agenda**

- The 2015 reform programme provided councils with the responsibility for leading the community planning process to produce a community plan for its district. The purpose of community planning is to improve the connection between all the tiers of Government and wider society work through partnership working to jointly deliver better outcomes for everyone. Community plans identify long-term priorities for improving the social, economic and environmental well-being of districts and the people who live there.
- Locally our view of what local government can deliver has been illustrated in the [Belfast Agenda](#), our city's community plan. The Belfast Agenda was developed in collaboration with partners from across the city, and set the long term outcomes that all stakeholder across the city want to achieve. The Belfast Agenda has demonstrated the potential for collaborative working to create changes in the economy, jobs, skills, tourism, and culture. Providing a vision for the city agreed across the public, education, business and voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors.

### **Transfer of planning powers**

- The transfer of most planning functions to the district councils necessitated the creation of a new planning system for Northern Ireland: requiring new roles, responsibilities and relationships for all those involved in the planning process. Councils took responsibility for:
  - Local development planning – creating a plan which will set out a clear vision of how the council area should look in the future by deciding what type and scale of development should be encouraged and where it should be located;
  - Development management – determining the vast majority of planning applications;
  - Planning enforcement – investigating alleged breaches of planning control and determining what action should be taken.
- Coming up to five years since councils took on this responsibility, it is widely acknowledged that the majority of planning decisions are taken at the most appropriate level, which is by locally elected representatives, who understand the needs their local areas, and can balance their decisions against the legal and policy framework which governs the planning process.
- The ability for councils to create their own local development plan has also been a welcome power particularly given the ability to link with community plans. This approach ensures that councils can take a holistic approach, spatial and needs based, in planning for their areas.

### **Barriers to success**

As well as successes from the 2015 reform programme, the Council accept that barriers remain which cannot be overcome in the absence of changes to the overarching policy and legislative framework which governs the operation of local government.

To address these prevailing barriers some of the main areas that the Council would wish to see greater devolved powers for to address local issues and support citizens, communities and the city would be in relation to:

### **Regeneration powers**

- The Council reiterates the view that the 2015 reform programme did not go far enough in terms of the powers provided to the council. In particular, the decision not to transfer regeneration powers has restricted the Council's ability to deliver transformative place-based plans for local areas and communities. It has also tempered the ambitions and aspirations of local communities, given the separation of local regeneration powers between central and local government. This has diluted our ability to connect land use planning, community planning with wider regeneration ambitions for the city.
- 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 across the city.
- The transfer of regeneration functions would have provided the Council with the ability to ensure an integrated approach to regeneration, addressing blighted areas across the city including, greater alignment of physical regeneration with the future Local Development Plan; and enhance the vitality of the city and further developing the rates base supporting further investment in front-line services.

### **Duty to co-operate**

- Although the production of the city's first community plan the Belfast Agenda is rightly regarded as a success. The Council would suggest that to truly translate the clear benefits of community planning, there is a need for greater collaboration between local government and government departments, in the planning, development, delivery and monitoring of interventions in order to increase their effectiveness for citizens and, in turn, creating a more cohesive society.



- Our existing community planning powers and thematic boards present an opportunity to deliver services tailored to the needs and expectations of local communities. However, it is critical that central government departments and partner organisations work in partnership with local government to ensure these ambitions can be realised across the network of services that communities require.
- The Council would suggest that to address this issue may require future consideration by central government of creating a ‘statutory duty to co-operate’ in respect of community planning. This duty would place a legal requirement on community planning partners to share information and resources, as appropriate, to ensure that the agreed priorities and outcomes of community plans are achieved.

**Q3: Mindful of NI’s recovery in a fragile economic period now emerging, should further reform (“RPA part II”) - an expansion of Council’s role - be accelerated or pushed back in 2021? Would Council support at this time commissioning (across the whole sector) actual evidence of real benefits, during early & mid 2021 in preparation for future reform, working also with the Partnership Panel?**

Given its experience with phase one of local government reform, in terms of the lengthy process undertaken, and the number of false start-stops and significant dilution of functions that ultimately transferred to councils. In the event of “RPA part II”, the Council will require early assurance and commitment by the NI Executive as to the parameters for a second programme of local government reform, which includes a clear programme timetable, benefits of reform and desired outcomes.

Subject to broad agreement between stakeholders across local and central government as to the nature of a second reform programme. The Council understand that the process for managing any future reform programme will require agreement between local government, the NI Executive and relevant government departments. This collaboration between both tiers of government must be informed by evidence collection and supported by direct engagement on the basis of transparency and partnership.

The Council also believes that any future review of the role of councils and associated reforms recognises the importance of councils as place based leaders. Local government understands its local communities and places it represents. This again highlights the need for any future

transfer of powers to be meaningful and to be of substance. The lack of regeneration powers currently residing in councils curtails our ability to fully deliver and meet the needs of local communities.

Given the current situation we all face due to the Covid-19 Pandemic an immediate expansion of place and regeneration powers to councils would be transformative in promoting strong recovery of local areas out of the Pandemic. Therefore, the council do feel that some aspects of reform should be accelerated and linked to Covid-19 recovery. These additional powers would provide councils with the necessary architecture to deliver on the priorities contained in local area recovery plans.

In addition, the Council would hold the view that any further devolution of powers to local government be considered in the first instance to those authorities that have demonstrated a real impact in terms of the successful delivery of the powers that were devolved to them during the first iteration of local government reform. An assessment should be carried out to ensure authorities have a track record of delivery to include appropriate management of costs.

Any further programme of reform much also recognise that each of the 11 councils have unique and different priorities in relation to their local areas. While there will always be a need for a regional consistency in terms of the broader role of local government. It would be valuable if a second reform programme explores the value and potential benefits of transferring specific functions and tailored devolution to individual councils or in clusters to address local area need.

**Q4: At strategic policy level rather than concentrating on specific functions (see 4.), would Council prefer greater legislative powers e.g. to better enable community planning, regeneration, growth / city deals, and locally led decision taking requiring government departments to agree to Council's investment priorities? What specific legislation or actions does Council wish to see?**

The Council recognises that our society is currently faced with a myriad of seemingly intractable issues such as Covid-19, employment, climate change, place shaping, housing and poverty that require strong leadership and well managed and resourced intervention.

We believe that some of these issues are best addressed by government at a local level, and in some areas this will require a change in our top-down centralised form of government. This requires central government providing local government with greater powers and responsibilities, provided for in legislation, in areas such as community planning, regeneration, planning, skills investment and local transport planning.

At a strategic policy level the principle of place-based leadership underpins the current direction of this Council in creating inclusive growth and delivering collaborative approaches to addressing many of the intractable social and economic challenges facing the city and its communities.

When properly resourced, it is our belief that this approach is the most powerful tool that local government has to address some of the biggest challenges we now face including, for example; climate change; productivity gaps; skills and employability, tackling inequalities and positioning our place to compete.

Place based policy is crucial for the success of local government, for four main reasons.

1. Cities and city regions can harness local and global economic capacity.
2. Place provides a coherent way to organise.
3. Place offers a way to reconnect and empower people.
4. A focus on place supports community identity and cohesion and is key in addressing exclusion, inequalities and participation by those normally under-represented.

It is important to understand that place-based policy doesn't necessarily mean devolving all powers and functions to local government. There are many areas in which the need for regional and national governance and policy is required. However, it does mean there needs

to be an earnest conversation with communities and across government and wider society as to the right level and scale of local government that is needed.

For this whole place approach to succeed, we would strongly advocate for the further devolution of core place-shaping functions, provided for in legislation, from central government to enable local government as a sector to deliver on these ambitions. These include:

**Urban Regeneration:** This power is important as it would enable alignment with other council functions to encourage positive and sustainable development at both community and city level. Historically, BCC has consistently put forward the case for the transfer of regeneration functions to Councils to enhance our ability to provide a coherent place-making model across the city. It remains our position that the anticipated transfer of regeneration powers to councils under the 2015 reform programme should be reviewed and extension or devolution of these regeneration powers should be brought forward as soon as practicable to enable BCC to fulfil its ambitions for transforming the city and its communities, based on the wishes and needs of local areas. This issue is also set out in our answer to Q2.

**City Skills Agenda:** While there is a range of activity taking place across Belfast and work is underway between relevant central government departments and the Council to explore how we can address the skills issues facing the city and constraining growth, the pervasive challenges of long-term unemployment, economic inactivity and a better match of skills demand and supply are not being addressed in a sustainable manner.

The Council recognise that planning at a local place level is the only way to match demand and supply across the City's skills network ensuring a tailored approach as required. The Council need to work alongside over relevant organisations in the public, private, voluntary, community and social enterprise sector to use our shared information to plan better around skills needs and training provision to meet these needs and support inclusive economic growth. To date a one size fits all approach has not addressed the systemic issues facing communities and business, this disconnect has greatly constrained economic growth and hampered the council's ability to address underlying social problems.

**Planning:** Extended planning powers, particularly around regeneration and local transport planning, would unlock more effective place shaping and provide for the sustained delivery of the physical aspects of the Belfast Agenda. This would also support more effective approaches

to statutory masterplanning and development partnerships with the potential to harness the full benefits of regeneration for local communities often blighted by inequalities. Broader responsibility in relation to built heritage should also be considered to provide for more efficient consideration of both heritage and conservation as part of the planning processes.

Increased functions in relation to roads, transport and housing in order to support place-making and regeneration, would greatly enhance the role of the councils as custodian of place and local communities. While recognising that there is a strategic regional role in these areas for central government departments, we believe that there is scope for local government and departments to work together to ensure that these top level strategic plans can be tailored and varied to suit local issues and needs within each council area.

**Community Planning:** Establishing a statutory duty to co-operate for community planning partners, to maximise the likelihood of delivering the outcomes and priorities articulated in community plans. This duty should require partners to work together, specifically in relation to sharing resources. This issue is also set out in our answer to Q2.

In respect of the suggested transfer of functions set out above, we recognise some areas may be best managed through partial transfer, as there are broader aspects to many of these matters, i.e. strategic transport networks, regional regeneration initiatives or policy associated with important retained functions, such as housing.

**Q4: Please see below a list of typical neighbourhood services of councils in other jurisdictions which are not the responsibility of councils in Northern Ireland. Does Council have a corporate wish to see such services as part of its portfolio / directly influenced by it (specific services can be listed as desirable, or not)?**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>On-street car parking</b></li> <li>• <b>urban and rural regeneration</b></li> <li>• <b>local roads and footpaths</b></li> <li>• local maintenance of roads and wider public realm such as gully emptying and gritting</li> <li>• <b>public housing</b></li> <li>• preventative health services</li> <li>• fire services</li> <li>• trading standards</li> <li>• <b>sewerage infrastructure</b></li> <li>• <b>libraries and museums</b></li> <li>• <b>street lighting</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Broadband investment – devolved budgetary control</b></li> <li>• <b>Local public transport</b></li> <li>• <b>further art, culture, sport policy &amp; budget</b></li> <li>• <b>further economic development such as Foreign Direct Investment and Skills Development policy &amp; budget</b></li> <li>• conservation of natural and built heritage</li> <li>• Fisheries</li> <li>• others (please specify)</li> </ul>
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In relation to the table above the typical neighbourhood services in which the Council may have a corporate interest in adding to its portfolio are highlighted in yellow.

However, it must be noted that this is early indicative interest and further detailed discussions and engagement with relevant service areas and elected members will be needed before adopting a definite position.

A critical area of concern which would require full clarity, before any transfer of these services could be contemplated, would be in relation to appropriate financing. Some of the service areas set out in this table have significant funding deficits, and the Council on behalf of its rate-payers would not countenance taking liability or ownership of without relevant guarantees being put in place by central government department. **This highlights the need for a New Burdens Doctrine to accompany transferring functions, see Q6.**

The Council believes that service delivery has the greatest impact when it reflect the needs of a local area and is delivered in an integrated and responsive manner. The Council believes

that issues relating to the scale and scope of area governance, as far as is reasonably possible, be determined by locally elected representatives chosen by local communities.

Local government has demonstrated that a strong centralised approach does not work, whilst a sense of place and a strong commitment to integrated planning and delivery does. The Council supports devolved decision-making and governance in this regard, with as much local input as possible.

Working with partners, local government is well placed to support the planning of services that affect citizens and communities at a local level. 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. Greater devolution of services at a neighbourhood level would allow for a more responsive approach to communities' needs and aspirations.

Better integrated services at a community level can be secured through the promotion of area based regeneration, using integrated neighbourhood working models (as appropriate to the local district); key stakeholders would have flexibility to align into these models as required, recognising council contributions, to achieve better service integration and desired outcomes.

By way of example of our commitment to this approach we have recently adopted an area based approach for our own services, to ensure better delivery of outcomes for residents. This has been supported through the creation of an 'area manager' who in effect has responsibility for integrated service delivery at local neighbourhood level aligned to broader citywide provision. It is our belief that devolution of neighbourhood services will allow for a more responsive approach to communities' needs and aspirations.

Examples of areas outside of current local government functions which may benefit from an area-based (neighbourhood services) approach include:

- Health and social care: local councils can play a role with partner organisations in promoting some aspects of health and social care, such as improving mental and physical wellbeing through the delivery of a range of programmes across our community facilities.
- Public protection: through better regulation to local communities, i.e. managing Housing of Multiple Occupations.

**Q6: To protect and ensure adequate resources for councils, NILGA has produced a New Burdens Doctrine, summarised in appendix C. All councils in the rest of the UK are protected by this, in some form to ensure legally that resources are guaranteed to be adequate to meet transferred responsibilities. Does Council consider this protection a "must have" in advance of any further transfer of powers, resources and / or services?**

The Council consider that the New Burdens Doctrine or similar assurances should underpin any future legislation or policy which may signal the transfer of functions or powers from central to local government. However it is vital that the approach to securing the introduction of such a doctrine does not stymie the transfer of certain functions, in particular those of a more strategic nature, such as regeneration. It is important to differentiate between strategic and operational functions in this regard.

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 any new burdens which may fall on local councils in moving forward are adequately resourced.

#### **Example - Enhanced enforcement role of councils**

The recent regulations brought forward by the NI Executive confers additional enforcement responsibilities on councils in relation to non-compliance by particular businesses and sectors of the NI Executive restrictions and guidance. In addition to this, the councils have undertaken to work in partnership with the police to deal with enforcement issues which arise in the hospitality during their normal operating hours. Councils have taken on this role to support their local areas and businesses. There has been no associated funding provided to councils to support the implementation of the extended enforcement role. If the New Burdens Doctrine had been in place then these transfer of additional responsibilities would have been supported with associated transfer of resources.

Therefore examples such as that provided above, highlights the necessity that new burden provisions should be incorporated into any future legislation which either devolves or transfers powers to councils. The legislation must also clearly identify the lead central government department which is responsible for securing the resources needed to fund the net additional cost falling on councils and ensuring the appropriate transfer of resources.



If the new burdens doctrine had underpinned those powers which transferred in 2015, it is likely that this would have resolved issues between local and central government relating to a lack of clarity over responsibility for when resources have not been commensurate with the functions that transferred.

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”.

**Q7: With investment priorities, budgetary constraints and new ways of working being practiced right now by Council, NILGA believes that *council led* shared services are one element of the future sustainability of local government. Is Council open to engaging in sector wide, strategic discussions around shared services, building on existing work, in order to define a strong vision and approach to this? What are Council's key requirements, if any, in terms of taking such discussions forward?**

The Council would be willing to engage in discussion and explore potential around this suggested approach, as we believe there is real opportunity to deliver value for money services alongside service improvements.

However, in light of previous experience relating to a shared services approach, we would note with caution the previous the local government lead, 'Improvement, Collaboration and Efficiency (ICE) Programme' which was taken forward in lead up to the first local government reform programme. This process was extremely resource intensive and there was a number of false dawns regarding moving towards agreed shared services approaches, and many councils chose not to adopt a shared services approach when it came to actual operational implementation, preferring to maintain existing service provision.

Therefore, any approach towards council led shared services must be supported by a coalition of willing partners across the local government sector. It is essential that any move towards a sector wide approach to shared services has clear parameters, agreed to and supported by elected members, highlighting those areas of collaboration which will result in efficiency savings and value for money for participating councils.

Another key requirement for the Council in terms of a sectoral shared services approach is the need for an evidence based approach. For this vision to succeed will require a significant level of trust and transparency between councils in terms of sharing information and resources, to ensure that decisions taken are sourced in evidence and on the best available data.

## **Q8 Has Council any additional comments or attachments it wishes to provide at this time?**

### **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

In addition to the answers provided above to the specific questions put forward in this consultation. The Council would also wish to put forward some additional general comments for NILGA's consideration. These include:

- The Council recommend that there is a commitment within the emerging Programme for Government to transfer important place-shaping regeneration functions, which complement the existing planning, and economic development functions of councils. If Belfast and the region are to remain competitive and continue to attract investment, it is important that we can respond to the needs and demands of potential investors.
- Any future reform programme provides an opportunity to fundamentally review local government finance particularly if a high degree of devolution was secured. The Council considers that increased financial powers for local government is necessary for securing sustainably funded local government moving forward. The Council believe than any future review of local government powers provides local government with an opportunity to partner to draw together existing interventions at a high level and to offer collective recommendations on financing, including new borrowing powers; simplified loan and borrowing regimes; and government incentives for start-ups in sustainable tax yielding industries.
- 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.
- The need to further strengthen the relationship between central and local government on a clear legislative and policy basis. This strengthened relationship should be underpinned by a shared commitment to delivering outcomes for our citizens. 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.

- A mechanism should be found for Councils to work alongside government departments in formulating and delivering cross – cutting recovery programmes. It is understood that a Town Centre Task force is to be set up as one potential recovery partnership and Councils would request a seat at this table. However, Councils have many other contributions to make, including the reframing of City Deals as key recovery investments, co-designing future shared prosperity funds, developing innovation hubs and rolling out digital investment.