

Banbridge District Council Response to the Call for Evidence on the Local Government Bill

This Council welcomes the opportunity to support the submission to the Committee on behalf of Local Government to be presented by NILGA.

Of particular concern to the Council is Part 12 of the Bill regarding the proposed concept of a performance improvement framework policed by Local Government Audit. The legislation would appear to be based on the prescriptive Best Value provisions brought into the UK by the 1997 Labour regime and the justification needs to be challenged.

In the 2002 review of Best Value legislation the NI Assembly accepted arguments put forward by local government that there was no requirement for a legislative regime involving a prescriptive panoply of performance indicators, league table reviews and mechanistic quantitative reports by Local Government Audit. Despite the increase in services and Councils' size, those arguments remain strong.

In summary, arguments against a prescriptive performance framework include the following:

- Size – UK local authorities provide significant strategic services in health, education and social services, represent approximately 25% of the public purse, and, are 80% funded by the Exchequer.
Reorganised NI local authorities will remain tiny in comparison representing just 5% of the public purse which will be 80% funded from local rates.
The argument that the Best Value Framework was essential for large profligate and politically motivated Councils in the UK does not carry in the much smaller politically 'conservative' NI Local Government regime.
- Equity – there is no evidence that there has been any historical need for a rigorous performance regime. Local Government Audit have an existing legal authorisation to carry out special value for money (VFM) audits and in the last 25 years have restricted this arm of their service to a periodic review of 'absenteeism'. If there was prima facie evidence of poor performance, Local Government Audit would no doubt have implemented this statutory prerogative.
- Capacity – Local Government Audit does not have the experience to fulfil the role envisaged in the legislation and would require a significant boost in resources to operate a sophisticated Framework.
- Costs – the costs of establishing a prescriptive 'performance industry' will displace resources which could more usefully be ploughed into services or help ameliorate the District Rate.
- Timing – it is clear that after 15 years' experience in the rest of the UK that there is a move away from the 'Best Value' approach of continuous improvement with decisions on Performance Reporting delegated to local government and being subsumed into local strategic planning.

This Council recognises that Councils should be obliged to report on performance annually and that Local Government Audit should provide assurance on such reports. It should be left to Local Government to develop the protocols and parameters of a performance improvement framework and to incorporate a more robust implementation of the ICE initiative.