

**Chair's Speech**  
**Members' Meeting of the National Association of Councillors**  
**Wednesday 19 June, 11am**

Chairman, Fellow Members, it is my pleasure to welcome you to Magherafelt this morning on behalf of Mid Ulster District Council, especially those among you who have travelled far today.

Here in Mid Ulster, our priorities have been as diverse and far-reaching as the district we serve, spanning the community, the economy, health and well-being, the environment, and of course unifying staff from 3 long-established councils and a central government department. As we enter into our new council term, improving the outcomes for Mid Ulster's citizens and businesses is once again at the top of the Councils agenda. The demand for improvement, its pace, combined with legislative requirements, have all increased dramatically in the last few years.

Mid Ulster District Council faces a range of challenges and opportunities that are common to us all working in local government, including a significantly reduced level of resources from Government to deliver key services. We have been tasked with making and delivering savings year on year without impacting on quality of service or outcomes, which is no mean feat.

This is married with increasingly higher expectations from customers. Digital disruption and the impact of social media are transforming the concept of public services, as well as the way we as councils communicate with citizens.

Yet this very scenario also provides an opportunity to re-think our role, the services we must deliver against those we would like to deliver and importantly how and, where they are delivered. Building capacity is a crucial task for us all in the next four years, as we seek to build skills, capabilities and processes to secure organisational resilience, and also being agile to respond to, and recover from, unforeseen challenges.

The needs of citizens and communities will require co-ordinated services that will lead to a stronger recognition of the role of local government. People engage with what they feel part of and value what they help to build. Working with citizens allows councils to fine tune services based on their actual needs.

Those needs constantly evolve and change. Within all our areas, our ageing populations combined with an increased life expectancy will place considerable strain on local government resources. Demographic projections show an increasingly diverse constituency, especially among the younger generation, something that we are acutely aware of here in Mid Ulster, which has a younger population than the regional average. We need to ensure we include these new citizens and voices in the fabric of our society.

To deal with challenges, partnership working becomes even more important. We are used to seeing the concept of community planning in action locally, where people, communities and organisations come together, taking the long-term view and tackling difficult issues to improve local well-being and quality of life for our citizens.

This partnership working needs to reach beyond our boundaries and address regional concerns with neighbouring authorities. The work of the N A C in bringing Members together to address common concerns and issues, and to provide a forum for shared knowledge, idea generation and a stronger voice is a vital part of this, and I would encourage Members across all eleven councils to participate.

It may strike a chord with some of you, but a word about the personal challenges Elected Members face is perhaps appropriate here too. Councillors' responsibilities and demands for their time and services have increased significantly in relation to carrying out their roles in public life, while continuing to provide support to their constituents and communities – a challenge that I have found first-hand experience of in the past few weeks as new Chair of Mid Ulster District Council. But this in itself provides opportunities to truly understand and see first-hand where the priorities in our districts are, what matters to our residents on the ground and how we might best address their concerns.

The challenges are great. However, our hope lies in a sector that encourages and supports active citizenship, teaches us to engage across our differences and helps us to build communities and bridge cultures.

I hope that this morning's discussions are useful for you, and encourage you after the meeting to take the chance to stop awhile with us, to perhaps take a stroll at the Hill of the O'Neill and Ranfurly House in Dungannon, or call into Seamus Heaney HomePlace, our world class literary centre based in the heart of the country where Seamus Heaney grew up, and described by poet Michael Longley as 'an echo chamber for the poet's beautiful lines.'

Thank you for your time and I shall hand back now to the Chair.