

Local Government Modernisation Programme in Northern Ireland

A Review of the Local Government Modernisation Taskforce

A report from the IDeA
October 2006

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Executive Summary

In response to the need both to modernise local government and implement the decisions of the Review of Public Administration, the Department of the Environment (DOE), in consultation with the sector, established a Taskforce in February 2006 to drive forward the necessary programme of work.

The Taskforce process over the summer of 2006 was inclusive, operated at speed and met the early demands of the legislative timetable. It was able to deliver proposals to inform policy and legislation and to identify key tasks for implementation.

However, as it moves into the implementation phase, there is now a clear consensus among all stakeholders that a review of the Taskforce, its structure and delivery mechanisms, is required. Consequently, a review of the existing Taskforce structure and delivery mechanism, was commissioned by the DOE and carried out by IDeA Peers in September 2006

This report provides the results of the IDeA review, and puts forward a revised format in terms of structure, remit and delivery mechanisms. It makes recommendations on the key issues that emerged through consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. It emphasises the need to underpin the workings of the Taskforce and to set these within the right climate and environment, to make it more streamlined, focused and effective in supporting and driving local and central government responses to the Review of Public Administration.

For the next stages there is a need in our opinion for a new model for the current Taskforce. The design we are proposing has three key components. In this report and the diagram on the new structure, we have provided more detail on the proposed remit of each of these elements, together with our suggestions on the membership for each of the three components and the knock on resourcing implications. For ease of reference we have summarised below the main purpose of each element within the new structure.

- **A Strategic Leadership Board** – which will act as the pinnacle and driver for the whole process operating rather as a major company board would.

The Board would have shared leadership, with the Minister acting as the Chair and the head of NILGA acting as the Vice Chair. It would comprise of 10 political party representatives (2 from each party). It would be 'serviced' by an advisory group of 6 senior local and central government staff led by an able local authority chief executive and a senior civil servant. We recommend an appropriate remuneration package for Members to reflect their additional duties. Officer posts would be seconded at one day per week with appropriate percentages of salary enhancements.

- **4 Policy Development Panels** (see diagram for detail) – whose role it will be to develop the overall work programme for agreement by the Leadership Board and act as both a commissioner and receiver of work both on key areas and on specific work streams. (For example, a work stream on the range of significant HR issues involved will need to be commissioned as one of the early issues that the Policy Panels need to address.) The policy development panels will be the engine that drives the whole process - setting and directing policy, referring recommendations up to the Board for decision, and commissioning work through the local delivery pilots, or individual projects related to specific work streams

[using a 'task and finish' small team approach, and following up on the previous work of the 9 sub groups].

Each panel will be chaired by an elected Member nominated by NILGA. Each of the remaining parties would have one representative on each panel with a designated alternate. For continuity purpose the Chairs could be drawn from the membership of the Strategic Leadership Board. The work of each panel will be carried out by a small group (8) of senior staff drawn from central and local government who are jointly led by a designated chief executive and senior civil servant. We recommend that the 2 lead officer posts are recruited to on a full time basis. The remaining 6 officers on each panel are seconded on a 2 day per week basis with appropriate percentage salary enhancements. We further recommend an appropriate remuneration package for Members to reflect their additional duties.

- **7 Local delivery Pilots** - whose main role will be to get to grips with the main infrastructure issues that will need to be tackled in the new councils, and develop business plans for the services transferring from central government. They will also have the opportunity to trial new initiatives. E.g. Local Outcome Agreements.

Each of the seven pilot areas will have 2 elected Members from each constituent Council reflecting the political diversity in each of the 7 areas. Each pilot area will be supported by the group of chief executives of councils within the boundary area. Local government should contribute staff resources on the ground as needed for individual pilot work. A core group of central government staff from the transferring departments will be available for discussion, advice and pilot work in specific areas.

We see this work as part of the essential 'day jobs' in preparing for RPA so would see the involvement of local and central government officers as contributions from those sectors in effectively implementing RPA without additional remuneration. However we have recommended the setting up of a 'bid pot' to resource individual areas initiatives or specific programmes.

We consider that the proposed structure, supported by:

- an effective communications strategy,
- an able and sufficient secretariat
- adequate resources, both in terms of personnel and funding

will work effectively to fulfil its purpose and drive the delivery of the modernisation programme.

The challenges of this level of change will provide opportunities for many staff. However the impact on staff generally will warrant sound consultation processes with all those involved including the relevant Trade Unions.

All the stakeholders we spoke to were keen to grasp the opportunities provided through a newly configured structure and delivery mechanism. There is also a general recognition of the opportunity to deliver world-class local government for the people of Northern Ireland through the Review of Public Administration.

If accepted, adopted and adhered to, the recommended new structure ['blue print'] for successful delivery on pages 6,7 & 8 should enable Stakeholders in Northern Ireland to demonstrate the leadership role of local government, ensure effective preparation by local and central government in response to the modernisation programme, and deliver the required outcomes.

However no structure regardless of its 'fitness for purpose', will deliver change and success without the right climate for implementation. Our discussions with stakeholders threw up a range of critical issues all of which will need to be tackled and dealt with, so that the new structure has a supportive environment and robust foundation within which to operate. These issues are discussed in more detail in the body of the report but the 'critical success factors' for implementing a successful 'blueprint for delivery' are summarised below

A revised structure (Blueprint) for the Implementation Task force is provided on pages 6, 7 & 8

Summary of Critical Success factors

- **A shared vision between all stakeholders on the shape of Local Government in Northern Ireland in 2009**
Local government in conjunction with key stakeholders needs to develop and agree a shared vision which demonstrates an appreciation of and commitment to the journey that needs to be made to deliver it.
- **An effective Local Government Association for Northern Ireland (NILGA)**
There is a need for a newly modelled local government association, which 'punches its weight' and is the conduit for a strong single shared voice for local government in Northern Ireland, which is supported and acknowledged by all stakeholders as playing a key role in delivering modernisation. (A review of NILGA was carried out in tandem with this piece of work and the results are the subject of a parallel report).
- **Developed Leadership and Decision Making**
With power comes responsibility. In our consultation and discussions, local government and party representatives indicated that they were willing to 'step up to the plate'. This needs to be demonstrated by an understanding of effective leadership, and a willingness to grasp the agenda and incorporate good governance principles into the decision-making processes.
- **Building trust and confidence**
The Review of Public Administration and the local government modernisation programme provide an opportunity for a partnership approach and a fresh start. Not just for local government, but also for central government and Social Partners in Northern Ireland. All stakeholders need to grasp the opportunity for partnership working and cultural change. The body of this report suggests ways in which this can be brought to life as a focus for joint working, for example through Local Output Agreements.
- **Building the capacity of key individuals within the process**
Members and Officers championing and implementing the delivery of strong local government need to be equipped with key skills, as well as access to research and information, to enable them to play the required roles in facilitating change and driving delivery.

➤ **Facilitating effective implementation and delivery through robust project management**

As the process enters the implementation phase it is imperative that the principles of good project management are applied and all partners have a clear understanding of these requirements and their importance in delivering the required outcomes.

➤ **Communication and engagement.**

The Review of Public Administration encompasses a range of stakeholders. Every group and individual the IDeA team consulted, stressed the need for effective communications. An effective Communication strategy, which facilitates openness and transparency and puts into place a two-way system of communication, is vital to ensuring the success of the process. The customer [the public at large], and the substantial number of committed staff involved are absolutely central to the whole modernisation programme and therefore need to be kept informed and involved throughout the process. .

➤ **Identification and allocation of resources to drive the improvement agenda**

Change and particularly major change of this nature, requires up front investment. There is an urgent need to develop an overall work programme which is supported by a robust resourcing strategy. The body of this report highlights the initial key elements that will need to be considered and built into this resourcing strategy. It also puts forward an imperative for the early identification and deployment of appropriate resources.

➤ **Making the most of the opportunities provided.**

Not since 1973 has local government in Northern Ireland faced such major change. This time, the proposed change is intended to enhance the role and responsibilities of local government. Local government will need to seize this opportunity as a vehicle for growth and development. This report with the proposed restructured Taskforce provides suggestions on practical ways in which these opportunities can be seized and potential barriers overcome to deliver for the benefit of local communities.

By tackling the main infrastructure issues identified above, adopting a systematic and transparent process for discussion and decision making which is underpinned by effective capacity building, local government in Northern Ireland will be setting firm foundations to achieve the aims of the Modernisation Programme.

**Local Government Modernisation Task Force
Blueprint for delivery -Mechanisms and Infrastructure
October 2006 to April 2009**

Secretariat support (Joint secretariat of DOE and NILGA staff to provide, policy research and organisational support.)

Implementation of Communications Strategy to ensure effective two way dialogue with all stakeholders within the delivery mechanism.

The recommended structure and 'blue print' for delivery will need to be underpinned by a strong infrastructure foundation which needs to include: -

- Identification and application of an investment and resourcing strategy.
- A locally led and managed effective communications strategy to build trust and confidence.
- Effective project management and clear operational terms of reference for all participants
- A transparent and fair selection and appointment procedure to match appropriate skills to requirements through the various phases of change.

Strategic Leadership Board

Remit and function	Membership	Resourcing
<p>Pinnacle and driver for the overall modernisation process. To agree a joint overall vision and strategy for change.</p> <p>To provide clarity on expected outcomes.</p> <p>To develop an overall work programme in conjunction with the Policy Development Panels.</p> <p>To advise the Minister on his key decisions and oversee the overall programme for modernisation</p> <p>To develop a systematic programme of dialogue and interaction with Social Partners.</p> <p>To value contributions and cascade questions and issues for action through the Policy Panels and Local Delivery and Implementation Panels.</p>	<p>Jointly led by a Minister and Chair of NILGA. With the Minister acting as Chair and the head of NILGA acting as the vice Chair 10 Political Party representatives jointly nominated by NILGA and the political parties.</p> <p>Senior <i>advisory</i> officer group composed of 3 designated CEs and 3 senior representatives from transferring depts.(Seconded) With a clear remit on the advisory role and the role for steering and developing a co-ordinated overall programme for delivery.</p> <p>A seconded CE and a seconded senior civil servant taking the lead on advising the group and jointly developing a programme of key issues for consideration by the SLB and proposing the overall work programme for the Policy development panels. (All seconded officer posts 1 day per week)</p>	<p>Development of a Resourcing Strategy, which identifies a significant new resource to underpin the modernisation programme and blue print for delivery. Key areas for consideration: -</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 'Paid' senior level local and central government individuals 2. Members remuneration package for participation. 3. Funding an initial development programme for Members and Chief Officers involved in the blue print for delivery. 3. Secretariat support (See below for details) 4. Communications Strategy and implementation (See below for details)

**Social Partners Forum
Liaison and Engagement**

6 weekly meeting between Social Partners and a core representative group of the SLB including the Minister and Chair of NILGA. 3 non-executive lay members acting as critical friends to the SLB

Cycle of operation

Pre-planned programme of meetings every six weeks.
Agenda publication and forum for input and comment on decisions to be considered as part of the communications strategy.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT PANELS			
Central and Local government relations & Shared Services*	Logistics and operational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Human Resources* ▪ Performance Review ▪ Finance ▪ Estates 	Governance & Community Planning	Capacity Building
Remit and function Four, new reconfigured policy panels (as above) to develop policy, lead on key areas, identify and manage linkages and overlaps within their own as well as other panel areas. To commission work on specific areas and key work streams. To report back on results to SLB To jointly bid for resources for local outcome areas, or specific initiatives To cascade down implementation on key projects to local delivery panels for pilot testing of policy proposals in geographic areas.	Membership Each Panel chaired by an elected Member from one of the Political parties. (1) (NILGA appointment) Each of the remaining political parties to have one elected Member on each panel (4) (NILGA Appointments) Panel chairs jointly advised by a local government chief Executive (designated full time post). (1) or other senior advisor with extensive local government experience And a (designated full time) senior civil servant (1). Core work and commissioning on each policy panel to be carried out by: - 3 Local government senior officers. 3 Central Government representatives. (Seconded at 2 days per week).	Resourcing As above- with regard to Members remuneration, Officer secondees, Secretariat support and communications strategy. Additional resource pot needs to be identified for work commissioned on individual work streams either as stand alone research and implementation projects or as implementation through the local delivery and implementation pilots.	
Cycle of operation Meeting every six weeks within individual policy development panels. Pre-determined programme of meetings to feed conclusions on policy formulation and results of Implementation work into SLB within the reporting cycle.			

* Further consideration will be required, possibly initially through a task and finish group with co-optees, on how and when the various complex staffing issues including consultation and equity will best be addressed.

Secretariat support (Joint secretariat of DOE and NILGA staff to provide policy, research and organisational support.)

Implementation of Communications Strategy to ensure effective two way dialogue with all stakeholders within the delivery mechanism.

Local Delivery and Implementation Pilots		
Up to 7 to reflect new geographical boundaries. (Subject to change post November depending on Assembly decisions)		
<p>Remit and function</p> <p>To consider local issues and feed key issues up to Policy Development Panels</p> <p>To develop business plans for key transferring services jointly with staff from central government departments.</p> <p>To make preparation for and test out the implementation of key policy and operational issues at ground level within possible new/ revised boundary areas.</p> <p>To contribute to the bids for local outcome agreements</p> <p>To develop awareness on roles and responsibilities for politicians with regard to transfer of functions.</p>	<p>Membership</p> <p>Each delivery pilot area to include: - 2 Members of each constituent Council reflecting the political diversity in each of the 7 areas.</p> <p>The chief executives from each of the councils represented within the boundary area</p> <p>Across all 7 pilot areas, a core group of staff from transferring Central Government departments. To be available for discussion and advice on specific transferring services. (TBC)</p>	<p>Resourcing</p> <p>As above- with regard to Members remuneration, Officer secondees, Secretariat support and communications strategy.</p> <p>Set up an individual 'bid' pot which each of the pilot areas can bid for on a competitive basis to trial pilot initiatives</p>
<p>Transferring Departments Forum Liaison and Engagement</p> <p>A regular cycle of six weekly meetings between a senior civil servant and key staff from transferring central departments to gain central government perspective and feed back to senior local government staff working on the 7 delivery pilot areas. Three local authority Chief Executives to participate fully in this forum.</p>		
<p>Cycle of operation</p> <p>To be confirmed. Suggested that the pilot implementation group, frequency of meetings is driven by the particular subject areas and delivery /business plans. As a minimum a monthly reporting cycle to be put into place for 2 way communication with the policy panels</p>		

Key principles, which the recommendations are based on

The recommendations we are making are a combination of what needs to be done to set up the revised structure for delivery to ensure its effective working, as well as those that are necessary to foster a climate which will allow the modernisation programme to develop, grow and be successfully implemented. We have therefore divided the recommendations into two sections.

- 1 Related to the structure**
- 2 Other important infrastructure issues. (Critical success factors)**

However all the recommendations should be considered in the light of key principles which have underpinned our thinking and which need to be acknowledged and owned by all stakeholders. These include:

- An agreed and shared vision between all stakeholders for local governance in Northern Ireland.
- Ensuring Best Value principles in all their aspects which should be observed and built in, with regard to economy, efficiency, effectiveness, equity, and sustainability.
- Joint and equal ownership between Local and Central Government of the modernisation programme.
- Commitment to identifying and allocating appropriate resources to fund the modernisation programme.
- Recognising the Local Government Association as the legitimate voice of local government in Northern Ireland, and providing it with support and resources to enable it to play this role.
- Clear political leadership of the process with structured arrangements to facilitate effective elected Member involvement.
- Building the capacity of all individuals and organisations involved enabling them to deliver the new arrangements effectively – staff are a vital part of the whole process.
- Fair and transparent recruitment processes.
- Commitment to a single clear delivery structure with a single strategic level board taking key decisions and agreeing recommendations and for this body to be jointly led by the Minister and the Chair of the Local Government Association. With the Minister chairing the Board and the Chair of NILGA acting as the vice chair.
- Effective arrangements for communication, liaison and engagement between all stakeholders.

- Individuals taking responsibility and each playing their part. (For example Members liaising with each other, making every effort to attend key meetings and having arrangements and personal responsibility for designated substitutes).
- A commitment to work together at a local level. To start putting the foundations of joint working together at grass roots levels. We have suggested developing Local Output Agreements in each of the new Council areas where central and local government could agree policy objectives, which would include aspects of Health and Education and other central functions not subject to transfer.
- Building in appropriate consideration of, and consultation on, staffing issues as part of the ongoing change process.

Recommendations

A Related to the revised taskforce structure (Blueprint for delivery)

I Agree, adopt and implement the revised Taskforce structure (Blueprint) for delivery, which includes: -

- A strategic leadership board, 4 policy panels and 7 local delivery implementation pilots.
- The membership of the 3 components of the new structure composed of local elected Members leading the work, and being effectively supported by able local and central government advisors (As described in the structure diagram.)
- An overall structure, which allows for leadership and policy development, but also allows piloting and preparing for change through the 7 local delivery pilots.
- Separate arrangements and forums for liaison and engagement with both Social Partners and Senior Staff from transferring central departments meeting on a 6 weekly basis.
- Clear role clarity and accountability for all involved

(See detailed recommended structure on pages 6, 7 & 8)

II Put in place a robust resourcing strategy that is designed to support the revised structure and is underpinned by an overall work programme. Identify and allocate priority resources to areas crucial to the implementation of the Blueprint for delivery, which includes: -

- A properly resourced recruitment and retention strategy to attract involvement of able and committed elected Members, who will champion, lead and be part of the new structure and implementation process.

- A resource pool for selecting/designating and seconding and retaining local and central Government staff acting in both a strategic and advisory capacity within the revised structure.
- Resourcing an initial capacity building and development programme for Members, Chief Officers and Advisory staff involved in the 'Blue print' for delivery.
- Resources ring-fenced for the recruitment and retention of a Corporate Director [Director of Communications] for the newly modelled NILGA – who will take on the roles of developing and implementing a communication strategy for the Blueprint for delivery.
- Recruitment and retention of a joint secretariat of DOE and NILGA staff to appropriately service the individual levels within the revised structure in terms of policy support, research and information and organisational support.
- Resources for training/capacity building those staff that may need to be redeployed.
- A resource pot that can be drawn on to commission work on individual work-streams within the 4 policy development panels. Either as stand-alone research and implementation projects, or as projects that need to be implemented through the local delivery and implementation pilots.
- Funding to support a pilot Local Output Agreement in each of the Local Delivery and Implementation pilots. (Could be based on the same format as the Local Area Agreements in the UK)
- Funds [a specific 'bid pot'] which each of the local delivery and Implementation pilots can bid for on a competitive basis, to trial pilot initiatives.

III Ensure Member appointments to the Board and Panels and the recruitment/secondment of core staff is completed by early November.

IV Develop a set of core criteria and guidance for the recruitment of the right individuals (Members and officers) for the new structure, to ensure the relevant skills and knowledge are brought to bear in implementing the programme.

V Develop and implement a structured capacity building programme:

- a. Which concentrates on the key skills necessary to enable individual members to play an effective part in civic leadership.
- b. Meets the requirements of officers involved in the programme to address their individual requirements in terms of understanding and handling change management and gaining a wider perspective, from outside Northern Ireland.

- VI Put in place an effective project management system**, which includes:
 - a. A detailed work programme with key dates and milestones for achieving delivery targets:
 - b. Specifications with regard to the duties and responsibilities of both Members and officers within the new structure.
 - c. A self-assessment of progress on achievement within 6 months of the new structure becoming operational.
- VII Set up a properly resourced Joint Secretariat of DOE and NILGA staff** with responsibilities for: policy, research and organisational support. Including a clearly understood remit within the secretariat with individuals taking key role responsibilities on individual areas.
- VIII Design and implement an effective communications strategy for the Modernisation programme which is jointly owned by Central and Local Government.**
(We would suggest that this is one of the most immediate tasks that the new Director of Communications based in NILGA should tackle)

**B To address the important infrastructure issues.
(Critical success factors).**

- IX Agree and adopt a shared vision for Local Governance in Northern Ireland which includes a clearly articulates view on outcomes.** Develop the 'vision' statement proposed by NILGA earlier this year. Work on the vision with the wider group of stakeholders in central government and social partners group, as well as local government, before amending as necessary and adopting as a basis for the shared vision for all stakeholders and local government to work towards [this probably warrants an early referral to a small task and finish group].
- X Agree, adopt and implement the recommendations made by the IDeA's Review of NILGA.** In addition ensure that the key roles for NILGA around communications, civic leadership and building trust and confidence, as recommended in this report, are addressed as part of the overall change programme.
- XI Make provision for joint funding within the newly modelled NILGA for a Corporate Director post [Director of Communications]** with key responsibility for communications and engagement.
- XII Set up pilot Local Output Agreements ultimately in each of the (7) new council areas**, to include joint planning with Health and Education and other central functions not subject to transfer.
- XIII Consider proposals for a dedicated department within Central Government, that deals with communities and local government issues in the medium term.**

1. Context and Methodology

1.1 Context

Not since 1973 has local government in Northern Ireland seen proposals for such significant change in its public services. The modernisation agenda, which proposes a more efficient and streamlined public sector in Northern Ireland, is being driven by the Review of Public Administration (RPA). The Department of Environment in Northern Ireland has been charged with driving this change and in March 2006 set up the Modernisation Taskforce to drive and implement change. Primarily for local government, the modernisation programme means a vastly changed landscape, with the number of councils being reduced from 26 to 7, whilst taking on new responsibilities and roles on services around Planning, Transport, Roads, Regeneration, Emergency Planning and Community Relations.

The structure of the original Taskforce consisted of a Political Panel chaired by the Minister, a working group chaired by the Permanent Secretary and nine subgroups which addressed the key areas of Finance, Human Resources, Estates, Governance, Community Planning, Capacity building, Shared Services, Central and Local Government Relations, and Performance Assessment. A designated senior officer from central or local government chaired each of the sub groups.

The terms of reference for the Local Government Taskforce were that it would produce proposals for modern and effective local government in the light of the requirements of the Review of Public Administration and other drivers for change. The taskforce would draw on independent expert advice and best practice from elsewhere but would seek solutions appropriate to local need and circumstances.

The first phase of the work was completed in the summer of 2006 with the sub groups producing proposals to inform policy and legislation. They also prepared road maps identifying the key tasks for implementation.

In August 2006, The Department of Environment in Northern Ireland commissioned The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), as part of continuing work, to carry out an urgent review of the Local Government Modernisation Taskforce make up and delivery mechanisms, and to provide recommendations to make its workings more streamlined, focused and effective. The purpose of the Review was to enable the delivery mechanisms to be 'fit for purpose' in supporting the Northern Ireland local government sector to implement the Review of Public Administration.

1.2 Methodology

Preparation for the review of the Taskforce started from the 4th August 2006. A pre-review telephone survey was conducted with all IDeA Peers who had worked on the project under the auspices of the initial programme. The purpose of the telephone survey was to gain initial perceptions of IDeA Peers currently working on the programme, their views on the current Taskforce structure and their opinions on what changes needed to be made to ensure a fit for purpose structure for delivery. The results of this exercise are appended (Appendix 1) to this report. The key findings of the survey have been amalgamated into the main report.

The Taskforce review was carried out between the 6th and 7th September on site in Northern Ireland. Through a series of interviews, meetings, focus groups and conference calls, the review team sought the views of all stakeholders involved in the process. They included the DOE, Political Parties, the NILGA executive and office bearers, representatives of local authority Chief Executives, the Chairs of the existing Taskforce as well as Social Partners and the staff from central government departments whose services were transferring to local government, as part of the Review of Public Administration.

The initial findings were presented on 22nd September to a group of stakeholders who participated in the review. This presentation was done to test out recommendations and build a consensus with a representative group of stakeholders to enable their views to be incorporated as appropriate into the final report and recommendations. Further meetings and presentations were held with the Task Force working group on 2nd October and the Political Panel on 16th October, before the report was finalised.

In conducting the review, the IDeA used a peer-based approach, which has been tried and tested through the IDeA flagship Peer Review programme. The peer review process is not an inspection, rather it offers a supportive approach, undertaken by friends, albeit 'critical friends', and its intention is to help identify current strengths as much as what needs to improve. We adapted and utilised an approach that has seen over 160 councils across the United Kingdom successfully reviewed by local government peers on more than 300 occasions in total. The Peers used for this review were from those involved in the previous phase of activity with the Taskforce and who also had expertise in implementing change management programmes.

The members of the team were:

- **Navaz Buhari** – Programme Manager IDeA who led the Review team
- **Richard Cummins** – Ex Chief Executive Wycombe D.C. IDeA Associate who worked on the RPA sub group on Shared Services
- **Councillor Kevin Wilson**
Ex Leader of Milton Keynes and an IDeA lead Member Peer
IDeA Associate who worked on the RPA sub group on Community Planning

The team was very appreciative of the welcome and support provided by Ian Maye and Grace McGuinness at the Department of the Environment. We were also grateful to Heather Moorhead, Chief Executive of NILGA for her co-operation in facilitating the running of the two reviews in tandem and for making the NILGA offices available for conducting the Taskforce review.

Most importantly the team would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions. The way in which elected Members both from NILGA and the political party nominees gave freely of their time and energy in helping the IDeA team to develop their findings deserves a special mention of thanks.

Finally we would like to thank Greg Magee from the Department of the Environment for his efforts in organising the review programme and ensuring that the review ran smoothly with the team able to meet a wide range of stakeholders.

2. Building an effective infrastructure and foundation of support

2.1 The summary of our report provided a list of critical success factors, which need to be addressed if the new recommended structure for the Task Force is to operate effectively and provide the required outcomes. The following pages expand on these critical success factors and provide suggestions for taking action to address them.

2.2 Critical Success Factors

2.3 A shared vision between all stakeholders on the shape of Local Government in Northern Ireland by 2009.

Several of the stakeholders we consulted and in particular the Social Partners group stressed the need for a shared vision that was endorsed and bought into by all stakeholders, working to achieve the Modernisation agenda in Northern Ireland. Elected members told us that although they might not agree on a political level they shared a common desire to make Northern Ireland a better place to live in and had the same aspirations, for improving the quality of life for members of their communities to achieve that aim. We would suggest that a shared vision, which was jointly articulated and adopted by all stakeholders, would form a strong foundation for any work plan and provide a focus for action within individual sectors. “ *We would like a choice of areas (of work) where we can make an impact so we can concentrate on those to make a difference*”. [Quote from member of the Social Partners group.]

A shared and jointly endorsed vision would provide an appreciation of and commitment to the journey that needs to be made to deliver it. At the highest level it would articulate the role that needs to be played to improve local civic leadership and set standards to provide safeguards to protect the most vulnerable elements of local communities.

At its conference in March 2006 the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) launched NILGA's shared vision for the future of Local Government in Northern Ireland. We would recommend that (with NILGAs agreement) this is widely circulated, particularly to the wider group of stakeholders in central government and the social partners group, before being amended as necessary and used as the basis for developing a shared vision for local government to work towards.

2.4 An effective Local Government Association for Northern Ireland (NILGA)

Local Government in Northern Ireland needs a strong, single shared voice, which speaks for the sector in the region and is supported and acknowledged by all stakeholders as playing a key role in delivering modernisation. The current local government association (NILGA) was the subject of another review that was carried out in tandem with the Review of the RPA Taskforce, and the results were reported within the same time scales in a separate report.

The process of implementing and delivering the work of the Taskforce is closely linked to a strong locally led democratic system. We would not want to cut across or repeat the findings and conclusions of the NILGA review. However the strong messages that came across to the IDeA team conducting the review of the Taskforce were that:

- NILGA has struggled to have the influence it should have – and should now be afforded a place at the ‘top table’ and be seen as a commensurate player.
- NILGA needs to be the partner of choice for Central Government and seen as an equal partner in delivering modernisation.
- There was a need for investment in NILGA both to build capacity and to provide appropriate remuneration packages to attract Members of the right age balance and calibre.
- The Executive and office bearers of NILGA were aware of the ‘step change’ needed and acknowledged that the association needed to be *“of a type not previously encountered”*. [Quote from NILGA executive group meeting.] Elected representatives were collectively keen to take on the responsibility and leadership roles needed to achieve this.
- There is an urgent need for strong managerial leadership at the helm of the organisation, to deliver the change management needed and to develop NILGA into the organisation that it aspires to be.

We would endorse the need for a strong Local Government Association in Northern Ireland. Consequently, several of our recommendations in this report, are predicated on the existence of a strong fit for purpose local government association, without which it would be impossible to deliver the style and scale of change needed. We would therefore recommend that the findings and recommendations of the NILGA review are adopted without delay and that the key roles for NILGA around communications, civic leadership and building trust and confidence, which we recommend in this report, are also considered as part of the overall change programme.

2.5 Developing Leadership and Decision Making

With power comes responsibility. In our consultation and discussions with local government, both Members and officers indicated that they were willing to ‘step up to the plate’. This needs to be demonstrated by an understanding of effective leadership, and a willingness to grasp the agenda and incorporate good governance principles into the decision-making processes. Elected Members we spoke to said *“It is up to us to prove that there is a valid reason for being there”*. The new Taskforce structure provides leadership roles for both elected Members and chief executives. It recommends that the Strategic Leadership Board at the top of the structure, be jointly led by a Minister, and the Chair of NILGA. There is a golden thread of Member and senior officer involvement throughout the structure with key areas of responsibility at each level of the structure. In recruiting Members and officers to work within the new structure, local government will need to ensure that it backs the people with the relevant skills, and that they are involved at the appropriate levels, and individually aware of their commitments and fulfil these effectively.

2.6 Building trust and confidence

The Review of Public Administration and the local government modernisation programme provide an opportunity for a partnership approach and a fresh start. Not only for local government, but also for central government and the Social Partners. All stakeholders will need to grasp the opportunity for partnership working and cultural change.

The revised Taskforce structure provides a mechanism for involving Social Partners by setting up a tri-partite forum for dialogue and discussion at the highest level. We would suggest that this takes the form of regular 6 weekly meeting with the Minister and the Chair of NILGA to consider issues and provide a focus for joint working.

We have detailed below the issues that will need to be addressed as part of a communications strategy. If effectively administered this will help to show transparency in decision-making and help to build trust and confidence.

The new duty for Community Planning provides an ideal opportunity for joint working. The local delivery and implementation pilots suggested as part of the Taskforce structure would be the ideal forum to develop Local Output Agreements, to include not just local and central government, but also the other areas of public sector provision in Health, Housing and Education. We would therefore suggest that the Local Delivery and Implementation Pilots consider negotiating and setting up Local Output Agreements as pilot case studies in each of the 7 pilot areas, or if that is not immediately possible, in a few individual existing councils.

2.7 Building the capacity of key individuals within the process and supporting overall delivery.

Members and officers championing and implementing the delivery of strong local government need to be equipped with key skills as well as access to research and information to facilitate change and drive delivery. There was strong support for all appointments to be made on the basis of merit with all appointing bodies being aware of the expectations on individuals.

The SOLACE chief executives we spoke to were keen to see clarity of roles between Members and officers. They recognised the legitimate role of elected politicians and the need to provide them with the right professional advice on which to base decisions. They were also keen to develop the expertise of local government staff and to use an able group of secondees from both local, and central government within the structure, to champion, and drive change.

There is therefore an urgent need to: -

Develop a set of core criteria and guidance for the recruitment of the right individuals both elected Members and officers, with the relevant skills and knowledge to implement the programme.

Develop a structured capacity building programme which concentrates on the key skills necessary to enable individual Members to play an effective part in civic leadership, meets the requirements of officers involved in the programme to address their individual needs in terms of handling change management, and learning from the wider local government community to broaden their sphere of knowledge and expertise so they are effectively equipped to advise and support Members in leading the change programme.

2.8 Facilitating effective implementation and delivery through robust project management

As the process enters the implementation phase it is imperative that the principles of good project management are applied, all partners have a clear understanding of these requirements, and their importance in delivering the required outcomes. In all our discussions with stakeholders, project management of the initial process was highlighted as the weakest link in the existing structure and all felt that it was critical to ensure that robust project management mechanisms are an integral part of the new delivery agenda. Some of the comments we heard were that stakeholders felt there was a lack of clarity and purpose, with information overload and a lack of understanding of relevant timescales for disseminating information, receiving feed-back and cascading key decisions to all parts of the structure. It is understandable that the speed with which the current Taskforce structure was set up, and the need for a focus on developing recommendations for legislative change, meant that in some cases project management became a casualty of the process.

We would therefore recommend several key planks in the new system to ensure effective project management. Essentially these are: -

- A detailed work programme with key dates and milestones for achieving delivery targets. [Bringing in experienced commercial project management should be considered for the next stages]
- A properly resourced Joint Secretariat of DOE and NILGA staff with separate and clearly defined responsibilities for: policy development, research and organisational support. Clearly understood remits for the individual staff and their key role responsibilities on individual areas are needed.
- Specifications with regard to the duties and responsibilities of both Members and officers within the new structure.
- An effective communications strategy – details for which are given below.
- A self assessment of progress on achievement within 6 months of the new structure becoming operational.

2.9 Communications and engagement.

The Review of Public Administration encompasses a range of stakeholders. Every group and individual the IDeA team consulted stressed the need for effective communications. *“This needs to be perceived as an inclusive process – not just rubber stamping. We need to know why life will be better as a result of some of the decisions being made”.* (Quote from Social Partners focus group).

During this first phase several other key issues have surfaced which have an impact on the role and workings of the Taskforce. Key among these is the transfer of additional powers and responsibilities around Roads, Planning, Transport and Regeneration to local government. Much of the detailed aspects of how these services will be integrated into the new councils have yet to be worked out. Our proposed structure provides a forum for joint work and discussion on these key issues within the (7) pilot areas. However, there is also much work to be done on some of the bigger issues around shared services, staff transfers, estates management etc, which have a direct bearing on local and central government staff. It is therefore crucial that as the Taskforce moves into the implementation stage, it is supported by an effective Communication Strategy, which facilitates openness and transparency and puts into place a two-way system of communication, to disseminate information, and also to provide an appropriate system for dialogue and feedback.

We have said earlier that NILGA needs to be seen as the ‘voice of local government’. The NILGA executive/office bearers we spoke to felt that they would welcome this role but would need to have a dedicated full time communications resource. Other stakeholders endorsed this view and felt this important role needed to be adequately filled and resourced so that it was able to produce both core information for the wider audience as well as relevant local information in a variety of formats, which both informed and reflected the implications of decisions for all stakeholders. *“There is a need to recognise that change as big as this requires a highly skilled specialist, and success depends on the quality of the information available”.* (Quote from an external expert).

We would therefore recommend that within the newly modelled NILGA there is provision for a corporate director post with key responsibility for communications and engagement. We would further recommend that one of the most immediate tasks for that post should be the design of an effective communications strategy that both defines and promotes NILGA’s role and also addresses the implementation of the modernisation agenda in Northern Ireland.

2.10. Identification and allocation of resources to drive the improvement agenda

Change, and particularly major change of this nature, requires up front investment.

Several key planks within the recommended structure require targeted resources, as does the need to co-fund some of the recommendations coming out of the NILGA review, particularly as these recommendations will have a knock on effect on the implementation work of the Taskforce. There is also a case for earmarking resources that are designated to developing specific projects, possibly being set up as part of a bid pot or a 'reward system' for those councils which show leadership in developing specific area based initiatives.

We appreciate that a clearly articulated case needs to be made which demonstrates how expenditure is matched to priorities and will help to deliver the modernisation agenda. There is therefore an urgent need to develop an overall work programme which is supported by a robust resourcing strategy.

Whilst not wanting to second guess the total implications of an appropriate resourcing strategy, the following list reflects the key initial resource commitments, highlighted in the revised structure, and provides a flavour of the range and level of resources that will need to be deployed as a matter of urgency to appropriately support the revised delivery structure leading up to implementation in 2009.

They include: -

- A properly resourced recruitment and retention strategy to attract the right calibre of elected Member, who will champion, lead and be part of the new structure and implementation process.
- A resource pool for seconding and retaining local and central Government staff acting in both a strategic and advisory capacity within the revised structure.
- Resourcing an initial capacity building and development programme for Members, chief officers and advisory staff involved in the 'Blueprint' for delivery.
- Resources for re-training staff who may need to be redeployed.
- Resources being ring-fenced for the recruitment and retention of a Corporate Director for the newly modelled NILGA – who will take on the dual role of developing and implementing a communication strategy for the 'Blueprint' for delivery.
- Recruitment and retention of a joint secretariat of DOE and NILGA staff to appropriately support the individual levels within the revised structure in terms of policy support, research and information and organisational support.

- A resource pot that can be drawn from to commission work on individual work-streams within the 4 policy development panels: Either as stand-alone research and implementation projects, or as projects that need to be implemented through the local delivery and implementation pilots.
- Funding to support some pilot Local Output Agreements in the (7) Local Delivery and Implementation Pilots. (Could be based on the same format as the Local Area Agreements in the UK).
- A bid pot which each of the local delivery and Implementation pilots can bid for on a competitive basis to trial pilot initiatives.

2.11. Making the most of the opportunities provided.

Not since 1973 has local government in Northern Ireland faced such major change. This time the proposed change is intended to enhance the role and responsibilities of local government. Local government will need to seize this opportunity as a vehicle for growth and development.

Key among these opportunities and challenges is the transfer of a raft of powers and services from central government to local government. The design of the existing Taskforce predated the DOE assuming responsibility for the work of these transferring functions. Consultation has been held on the legislative process but much urgent work remains to be done both at a strategic level and an operational level. We found a high level of anxiety both within local government, and from central government staff, all of whom stressed the need for urgency. Staff from both central and local government who are potentially affected by the process are keen to get to a positive understanding on how the individual areas will be dealt with and incorporated within the newly configured councils. Crucial issues that need to be tackled include the development of business models, (e.g. with regards to Roads) as well as the overarching issues relating to staff deployment and maintaining morale in an uncertain climate. There is also a need to advise and prepare elected members for their new roles and responsibilities which they will need to take on to manage the new transferring functions.

In the focus group we held with staff from transferring central government departments they emphasised the need to set up a central panel where the issues could be debated and agreed with guidance from 2 or 3 designated local authority chief executives prior to moving on to implementation planning at a local level. This was supplemented by a strong call to start working at a geographical level through a practical practitioners group so that the key questions around staff, equipment, policy and procedures could be realistically appraised and tackled at a local level, where it would eventually need to be implemented.

The emerging message from chief executives and staff from transferring departments was unanimous in emphasising the need to become ready to start working at a local level and that it made sense to do this within the 7 areas designated for the new councils, with the caveat that this was not in any way seen to be endorsing the model of 7 councils. The work at a local level could always be expanded to match a larger number of councils (11 or 15) if this was the way the final decision went.

Despite the immediate need to get from concept to delivery, the IDEA review team were careful to triangulate their evidence and diagnosis in this sensitive area before suggesting the development of 7 local delivery and pilot areas. We therefore tested this concept with the Political Panel of the existing Taskforce. Their view was helpful in providing us with a conclusion and formulating our recommendations.

Some stressed that they were fundamentally opposed to the model of 7 councils. However, they felt that local government needed to demonstrate a much greater leadership role. They were pragmatic in their approach in that no matter how many councils there eventually were, they needed to be fit for purpose and functional. They agreed to the possibility of officers beginning to work on key areas and functions within some or all of the geographical pilot areas – with a view to working across a larger landscape if the final number of councils changed.

The other big issue raised in the context of the transferring functions from the DOE was the need for central government to recognise the need to have a dedicated department within it, which related to and understood the issues within local government. *“Central government needed to share the same view as local government on how they were going to set up and run things”* (Quote from transferring departments focus group). The English model of the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the recently named Department for Local Government and Communities is one that might be considered as a model for a move towards this format in Northern Ireland at a later date. However in the immediate future, local government did want a forum where they could discuss and agree issues with Central Government before they became part of any formal decision making process.

We would therefore recommend that the overall revised Taskforce structure includes local delivery and implementation pilots within the (7) geographical areas designated for the new councils. As part of the Implementation process, the new structure should include a forum for debate and discussion between key staff from transferring central departments, representatives of the (7) areas and a senior civil servant on a 6 weekly basis.

We would further suggest that central government in the medium term considers proposals for a dedicated department that deals with local government issues.

3. Conclusion

The IDeA brief from the DOE was primarily to conduct a review of the existing Taskforce and to put forward recommendations that would make the revised structure more streamlined and effective, in delivering the required outcomes. However in this review, we have gone further than purely meeting the requirements of the brief. We have addressed the major infrastructure issues that impact on the delivery mechanisms, and need to be resolved to enable the 'Blueprint for delivery' to have a chance of succeeding.

Yesterday local government in Northern Ireland had a minor role; today there is an opportunity to make a difference. Tomorrow could see strong effective local government with community leaders responding to the needs and aspirations of their areas and making a real difference for the better. Local government in Northern Ireland will need to have the vision, the energy and the commitment to grasp the opportunities and move from yesterday to tomorrow. We end this report on a quote from the focus group we held with existing Chairs of the Sub groups. *What we need is a strong clear single model where local government plays a leading role – we'd like to think that local government is up to it.*

Navaz Buhari
Programme Manager IDeA

Appendix 1 overleaf provides a short report on the telephone survey with IDEA Peers who worked on the original Taskforce.

This short survey was carried out prior to the IDEA Review on 6th and 7th September 2006.

APPENDIX 1

Survey of the 12 IDeA Peers Involved in Preliminary Work on RIPA Implementation in Northern Ireland

Introduction

Twelve individual IDeA Peers were involved between April and early July 2006 in working with Taskforce Subgroups in Northern Ireland. The task was initially to recommend enabling legislation changes to allow Local Government in the region to move forward to an April 2009 reorganisation into fewer, stronger, councils.

The Department of Environment Northern Ireland commissioned further work from the IDeA to review the process to date by mid September 2006 and to outline the proposed route forward for successful implementation in April 2009.

A part of this further IDeA work is this report based on structured questions delivered to the IDeA Peers via a telephone survey.

Findings

1. Good Aspects of the work so far

Factors quoted by 3 or more peers were:

- The ability level of officers and partner bodies involved and their willingness to learn and change (7 mentions)
- The enthusiasm, energy and wish to progress shown by nearly all involved (5)
- Good chairs (5)
- The positive reception for the peer process and the chance of mutual learning (4)
- The fast pace/momentum built up (3)
- Wide, inclusive group membership (3)

2. Aspects of the Process So Far Warranting Review

- The number of people or groups and/or the wrong person as Chair (5)
- Capacity issues facing the change process and the need for adequate funding (5)
- Greater clarity needed on the role of empowered local leadership to differentiate local government from the Assembly – what is local government for in Northern Ireland? (4)
- Need for structure and central coordination for all future steps of the process (4)
- Clarity of who is doing what (3)

3. Future of the 9 Work Program Areas Undertaken to Date

- All peers saw a need for continuing work in some form by people in Northern Ireland on the work streams
- Pilot work for some areas, capacity building in all areas, and the need for clarity of work programmes were all identified by many

- A reformed, more effective NILGA was seen as a priority
- The need for an arrangement similar to the IDeA, but linked to a larger picture than Northern Ireland was put forward by several people
- It was felt that the IDeA/peers should be consulted on the drafted legislation proposals at an early stage
- Selling the concept of 7 councils (or any other decided number) to people more generally was seen as important for progress

4. Political Involvement

- A fully effective NILGA with sufficient capacity is a pre requisite to effective local government and is lacking
- Political attendance must be strengthened
- The empowerment of individuals to be present and speak for their parties is important
- On some work stream groups political involvement was seen as having been good. Especially where strongly encouraged by their group chair

5. Stakeholder Involvement

- Generally this was felt to have been good or very good so far
- Needs refining and focusing for the longer haul of implementation
- Some key absentees and also some believed to be by passing the arrangements
- Disproportionate numbers at times – consultative groups might work better

6. Project Management to Ensure Effective Delivery

- Overall the response was that a number of individual contributions had achieved the progress to date under less than favourable circumstances
- Project management was seen as weak but improving
- Clarity, an approved timeline, trained capable project management staff, and engagement of key individuals and organisations from the start of the next phase were all seen as vital
- Too much had been left to individual chairs or people in their groups so far and will need to be addressed consistently if this is to be a successfully implemented project

7. Future Structures to Facilitate Programme Delivery

It was felt that this needs urgent focus and decisions. However the range of suggestions was wide.

- Adequate resourcing of the work is essential – individuals of ability, suitably trained, and funding
- An overall clear plan of action is vital and sub groups tasked clearly
- NILGA must be improved and focussed, involved in capacity building
- A single Taskforce, chaired by Politicians but involving managers was proposed by one peer
- Peer Northern Ireland members with broad knowledge should be developed and involved
- Decisions are needed on fewer sub groups (or not) and how fast work can move down into the 7 more local areas

8. Important Issues Not Covered by these Questions

- Proper engagement of political parties
- Sufficient involvement of key parts of the NI Civil Service in the process
- Wider lessons for UK as a whole and sharing with NI
- Availability of feedback/teach-in on the process to date
- Appreciation of the magnitude of what the DOE has taken on

9. Any other important issues/comments

- Capacity generally of the system/individuals to cope
- The importance of the issue
- Use experience from elsewhere when appropriate – some best practice to be found in each of Scotland, Wales and England. Learn from their errors too.
- Recognise the potential for Northern Ireland to have world class arrangements by 2010 – go for it and be proud
- Complete re design of NILGA needed
- DOE & NILGA both need more help

Conclusions

The issues are complex, the process to date has been very positive. People involved in Northern Ireland are able and enthusiastic: there is much scope to improve urgently in moving into the next, more considered, stages.

There are many strengths to build on, but the need for radical change in many areas is clearly identified. Action points from this survey of the 12 IDeA Peers involved need to be considered alongside and within the detailed issues coming from the focus groups being held in Northern Ireland on 6 and 7 September 2006.

Richard Cummins
IDeA Peer
3 September 2006