

Key Outcomes from Strategic Leadership Board (SLB) 23.01.09

SLB Personnel Changes

- Councillor (Cllr) Sean McPeake has replaced Cllr Alex Maskey on the SLB.
- Geoff Allister, Chief Executive of Roads Service, has replaced Paul Priestly as the Department for Regional Development (DRD) representative.

Minutes of Meetings

- Minutes from the previous SLB meeting on the 05 December were approved subject to some minor amendments. These will be available soon on the Local Government section of the Department of the Environment (DOE) website and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) website.
- www.doeni.gov.uk
- www.nilga.org

Rates Package

- Cllr Helen Quigley, NILGA, thanked Minister Wilson for his support in relation to the £8 million rates package for local councils that was announced by Nigel Dodds on the 19 January.
- Local government still has some serious concerns and would like clarity that they will not have any additional costs incurred as a result of problems with Land and Property Service's (LPS) new system. It would also like increased input to the decision-making process in terms of the governance of LPS.
- Minister Wilson encouraged NILGA to continue to pursue this with Minister of Finance, Nigel Dodds and to advise him of the outcome.

Secondment of Staff

- NILGA has not reached a definitive view on the issue of seconding central government staff to local government. The Human Resources Working Group, chaired by Eddie Curtis (under Policy Development Panel C), is taking forward further work on this issue and is expected to report back in April 2009.

Role of Winding-Down Managers

- Dessie Mitchell and Wavell Moore have been commissioned to provide additional detail on the role of Winding-Down Managers, particularly in relation to the proposed financial responsibilities. A report will be presented for consideration at the 10 April SLB meeting.

Transition Committees

- Further guidance will have been produced for Transition Committees by the end of March.
- The Minister has asked Panel A to further consider options for appointing members to the new Statutory Transition Committees. He would like to ensure, if possible, that Transition Committees are as inclusive as possible.

Service Delivery and Implementation Framework of the Local Government Reform Programme

- PricewaterhouseCoopers was appointed on the 14 January 2009 to take forward an assessment of options for local government service delivery.
- A Transfer of Functions (TOF) Working Group is being established as a matter of urgency. Peter McNaney (Belfast City Council) will be Chair, with Ian Maye (DOE) as Vice-Chair. It will comprise key staff from the transferring functions departments and senior local government officials.

- The TOF will look at the detail of the functions transferring, along with a “task and finish sub-group”, to facilitate detailed discussions with Roads Service on the public realm functions to transfer.
- The Department for Regional Development (DRD) “task and finish sub-group” has already met. Discussion has highlighted that to allow for efficient and effective options for operational delivery of functions, Departmental officials now require some flexibility to discuss the most appropriate delivery mechanisms with local government officials.
- Alderman Hatch, chair of PDP C, has written to Minister Wilson to seek his support in encouraging ministerial colleagues to permit their respective officials to discuss marginal changes from the functions being transferred, where this is justified on a service delivery basis. Proposals will be brought to SLB.
- A chart detailing key milestones for implementing the Local Government Reform Programme was tabled. This is a starting point for the implementation phase and continuous feedback and updates are requested from the sector in order to represent achievable targets and timescales. The Minister agreed to develop a simplified chart which can be used to more widely communicate the high level information.
- A summary document will be circulated to provide further clarification on what is in each of the Bills and the legislative timescales for the Local Government Reform Programme. This will also be available on DOE and NILGA websites.

Update on Severance for Elected Members

- NILGA to discuss and write to Paul Goggins to support Minister Wilson’s position on the need for the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to amend the law on co option in order to pave the way for an early severance package.

Area Plans and Transition Committees

- Planning Service presented a paper setting out the current area plan programme, including an estimate of the anticipated position at the point of transfer in 2011.
- Planning Service also provided information on the proposed reforms to the development plan system, designed to speed up the plan preparation process and ensure early participation by key stakeholders, including possible engagement with Transition Committees in advance of transfer in 2011.
- Local government would welcome early engagement including looking at establishing possible pilot projects.
- Clarification was also provided on who would have responsibility for meeting the cost of possible judicial reviews in respect of area plans prepared by the DOE and inherited by local government. SLB accepted the Panel C view that local government would not have to meet any costs arising from decisions taken by Departments.

Planning Oversight Powers

- NILGA confirmed that on the issue of central government maintaining some powers in overseeing planning decisions, their preference is a system similar to that currently available to central government in the rest of the UK.
- This means that the DOE can intervene on a council’s planning decision if appropriate; such as if a council fails to discharge its functions.
- The DOE would also retain specific intervention reserve powers to be used in exceptional circumstances.
- NILGA emphasised that acceptance of this proposal is subject to strong supporting governance arrangements being put in place.

Date of Next Meeting

- The next SLB meeting will be held on Friday 06 March 2009 at 10.00 am.