

LOCAL GOVERNMENT TASKFORCE
CENTRAL/LOCAL RELATIONS SUB-GROUP

DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE

Introduction

On 22nd November 2005, the Secretary of State announced decisions relating to local government in Northern Ireland as part of the Review of Public Administration. A further announcement on the future of Quangos, and Executive Agencies within departments was made on 21st March 2006.

In consultation with Local Government the Department of the Environment has established a Local Government Taskforce, to develop plans for the introduction of new local government arrangements. The Taskforce will engage politicians strategically through a Political Panel, which along with the Working Group will provide oversight, cohesion and direction to the RPA implementation process. A number of work streams will be taken forward through nine sub-groups, and many of the issues developed will feed into the new legislation being developed for local government. One of these sub-groups is charged with addressing the issue of central and local government relations.

(1) Central/Local Relations – backcloth set by RPA process

The RPA further consultation document published in March 2005 referred to the proposed two-tier model of public administration envisaged:

The key messages from previous research and the first round of consultation included a desire for high-quality services accessible to all, and strong local government. Following further research the RPA team developed a set of proposals based on a two-tier model of public administration. This would have a regional tier encompassing the Assembly, government departments, and regional authorities, which would focus on policy development and setting standards, as well as delivering regional services.

The second tier, a sub-regional tier, would encompass organisations that ideally operate within the same boundaries as one another, and would include councils, health bodies, other sub-regional bodies and sub-regional delivery units of regional bodies. There would be a presumption in favour of delivery at the sub-regional tier, except where economies of scale or other factors would argue strongly for delivery on a regional basis.

Within the model, there would also be an enhanced role for both the private sector and voluntary and community sectors, and a formal liaison arrangement between central and local government.

Subsequently, in his announcement on 22nd November 2005 of the RPA outcome, Lord Rooker made the following reference to the topic:

Central/Local liaison arrangements

Under the new arrangements, local government will have a more significant role in the overall governance of Northern Ireland. I have therefore accepted the view of many who responded to the consultation and decided that there will be a formal mechanism for central/local liaison. We will develop such arrangements in co-operation with local government. But it is vital that central and local government respect each others role and work together for the good of Northern Ireland.

Most recently, the publication 'Better Government for Northern Ireland – Final Decisions of the RPA' had this to say:

It is vital that councils work together with central government to deliver overarching government policies.

(2) Issues for consideration:

- (i) Role of central and local government
- (ii) Scope and level of engagement between the two sectors of government in the new arrangements
- (iii) Identification of appropriate formal liaison mechanisms at political, strategic and operational levels
- (iv) Role of private and voluntary sectors

(3) Outcomes

The sub-group is being asked to provide a report by 30th June 2006 identifying:

- (i) the most appropriate mechanisms to provide the optimum liaison between central and local government in carrying out their separate but inter-related functions
- (2) legislative proposals required to implement these mechanisms
- (3) an outline implementation plan to develop the new arrangements and put them in place for 2009.