

Local Government Taskforce
Central/Local Relations Sub-Group
Paper to Taskforce

28th June 2006

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Acknowledgements

The Sub-Group on Central-Local Relations of the Local Government Taskforce had a wide range of expertise available to it spanning members from central government departments, local authorities, politicians, the voluntary and community sector (NICVA), the Consumer Council, the private sector (IoD), SOLACE, the IDeA and academia (UUJ). Those involved gave of their time and expertise generously particularly given the demands of the task and the short timescale involved to complete it.

As Chair, I wish to record my sincere thanks to all my colleagues for their input to this report, which both envisions the new style of central/local relationship which will be needed for this new era in the public service as well as suggesting appropriate legislative mechanisms on which it should be based.

I am particularly grateful to Andrew Hassard and Stephen Finlay who offered much practical support both in research and discussion between meetings and also to Professor Colin Knox whose expertise in the topic combined with his excellent drafting and facilitation skills were invaluable. In addition Richard Kemp and Eleanor Kelly from the IDeA provided a most helpful wider perspective to our deliberations.

Thanks are also due to Angela Fitzpatrick from the Department of the Environment for her sterling secretarial support throughout the process as well as the local authorities in Craigavon, Moyle and Coleraine where sub-group meetings were hosted.

Members of the sub-group (listed in Appendix 1) all viewed their involvement as a unique opportunity to help shape the future of this central/local relationship which has the potential to play such an important part in providing cohesive services for the Northern Ireland public whom we all serve.

Wavell Moore
Chair
Chief Executive, Coleraine Borough Council.

June 2006.

Executive Summary

- ✚ The Review of Public Administration provides for a two tier model made up of a regional and local tier of governance in Northern Ireland. The regional tier will be involved in policy formulation, strategic planning, and setting and monitoring standards of public service. At the local level, councils will be at the centre of service delivery and civic life. A formal mechanism is needed for central local liaison. This report addressed the legislative requirements necessary to ensure the optimum level of collaboration between central and local government.
- ✚ To conceive of central local relations purely in terms of the 11 government departments and new councils in Northern Ireland is too restrictive and fails to recognise the myriad of relationships that co-exist and overlap with other stakeholders in the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. Hence, whilst this report attempts to define the strategic model which will best suit the circumstances, in practice, the complexity of multi-level governance will ensure that central/local relations will remain an evolutionary and wide ranging issue.
- ✚ The Group's thinking has been informed by the Welsh model of central local relations not least because of its similarities as a devolved region and research evidence suggesting a 'partnership of equals' between central and local government. Northern Ireland is, of course, quite different from other parts of the United Kingdom in the structure, functions and financing of its local authorities, the absence of a modernisation agenda and uncertainties surrounding local strategic partnerships, to name but a few.
- ✚ Existing relations between central and local government are *ad hoc*, informal and personality dependent, and therefore in need of reform. The Group's proposals are based on a model of central local relations which comprise: a lead Local Government Division (entitled 'Communities and Local Government') and Minister for the sector within OFMDFM, a Partnership Panel, Local Area Agreements, all bounded by a set of partnership principles to which all participants sign up.
- ✚ The Partnership Panel is the political centrepiece of this model consisting of councillors from local government and Northern Ireland Executive Ministers. Councillors will be appointed to the Partnership Panel via NILGA to represent each of the new local authorities and the five largest political parties. The Panel would be chaired by the First or Deputy First Minister sitting alongside the Minister for Communities and Local Government and his/her selected ministerial colleagues. Politicians will be supported by Local Authority Chief Executives and Permanent Secretaries. The day-to-day business of the Partnership Panel will be vested in a joint secretariat from the Communities and Local Government

Division (OFM&DFM) and local government (NILGA). Joint working groups will take forward work on legislation, policy and other sectoral issues; such joint working will help develop mutual trust and respect.

- ✚ Local Area Agreements will be negotiated between central and each of the local authorities for a fixed term (electoral) cycle. They will include common regional (top-down) priorities contained in the *Programme for Government: Priorities and Budget* and locally determined (bottom-up) priorities articulated via the community planning process. The resulting local area agreements offer the opportunity for 'joined-up' government in which the key stakeholders (central and local government) are mutually accountable through the Partnership Panel.
- ✚ All of the above requires not simply a statutory structure and process but, as importantly, a willingness on the part of both sectors to establish a partnership of equals based on mutual trust and respect. Capacity building opportunities (job exchanges, joint working arrangements and information sharing through conferences/seminars) should begin immediately to build understanding in advance of the Partnership Panel proposed for 2008 (the establishment of shadow councils). Both central and local government recognise the challenges and opportunities which lie ahead. These proposals attempt to capture the good-will that exists to build central local government relations which will ultimately lead to the delivery of better public services in Northern Ireland. The Group commends the model set out here for your consideration.

1. INTRODUCTION/TERMS OF REFERENCE

1.1 The outcomes of the Review of Public Administration (RPA) are predicated on a two-tier model comprising a regional and local tier of governance in Northern Ireland. In essence, at the regional level the primary focus of Ministers and their departments will be to formulate policy, strategically plan services, set and monitor the standards of service, and ensure Ministerial direction. At the local level, councils will be at the centre of service delivery and civic life. According to the Secretary of State, local authorities will therefore 'be key to planning and delivery of services and to engagement with communities'¹.

1.2 In view of the 'significant role for local government in the overall governance of Northern Ireland'², Lord Rooker the then Minister for the Environment announced, in response to the consultation process, 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 other's role and work together for the good of Northern Ireland³.

1.3 This statement provides the rationale for the work of this sub-group on central/local relations, one of nine sub-groups set up by the Local Government Taskforce. The overall aim of the Taskforce is 'to produce proposals for modern and effective local government in light of the requirements of the Review of Public Administration and other drivers of change'⁴. The specific terms of reference of the sub-group were to provide a report (by 30th June 2006) identifying:

- *The most appropriate mechanisms to provide the optimum partnership between central and local government in carrying out their separate but inter-related functions.*
- *Legislative proposals required to implement these mechanisms.*
- *An outline implementation plan to develop the new partnership arrangements and put them in place for 2009.*

1.4 The sub-group comprised 32 members as follows: Chair; political parties (5); officials from government departments (12); local government (7); Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) (1); Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) (2); Institute of Directors (1); Consumer Council (1); Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Activity (NICVA) (1); and academia (1). See appendix 1 for membership.

1.5 The breadth of membership was an attempt to incorporate the disparate interests in the outworkings of the RPA. The role of the voluntary and community sectors, for example, was specifically referred to in the RPA consultation document where it was envisaged that they would 'develop in

scale and importance at both the local and central levels of government'. Equally, the Review saw the private sector with 'an expanded role in the provision of public services'⁵ which Lord Rooker explained further as 'having a powerful role to play, working alongside councils and other areas of the public sector, providing joint impetus for urban and rural regeneration'⁶. Hence the sub-group has attempted to be inclusive in its deliberations taking into account the wide range of stakeholders with an interest in central local government relations.

- 1.6 This report outlines the findings of the Central/Local Relations Sub-Group. We have been acutely aware that the Department of the Environment's imperative is for the sub-group to bring forward changes that will enable the necessary legislative requirements to be put in place. However, the sub-group felt it was essential to put such proposals within the fullest possible context and to flag up a range of actions which might be taken to advance cohesion in the public sector. We also recognise that there is much work to be done to translate these proposals into implementation.
- 1.7 Drawing on the terms of reference for the sub-group this report is structured in the following sections:
 - Local Government: a new era – the background
 - A more precise understanding of central local relations
 - Consideration of the possible mechanisms to enhance central local government relations
 - Modelling appropriate central local relations for Northern Ireland
 - How best to implement the proposals

2. LOCAL GOVERNMENT – A NEW ERA

- 2.1 The Review of Public Administration offers local government in Northern Ireland the opportunity to evolve from what might be perceived as a locally elected body with a fairly limited role in service provision to a modern and effective sub-regional tier of governance. Councils' new and enhanced functions in planning, local roads, urban and rural regeneration and some housing services will ensure that their role in service delivery is expanded (albeit for about 10% of the public budget) but, even more perhaps as importantly, their ability to enable and influence through statutory powers of community planning and well-being is seen as a crucial enhancement.
- 2.2 Local government now has an opportunity to redefine its key role, modernise the way in which it conducts business, and deliver better services to its citizens. Local government therefore needs to connect to community and neighbourhood levels, particularly under the larger reorganised councils, and help create identity, belonging and social cohesion. It should provide, or ensure the provision, of excellent, appropriate services. Local government also needs to develop areas socially, economically and environmentally⁷. Part of this agenda is working as an equal partner with central government to ensure common purpose moderated through an effective mechanism of central-local government relations.
- 2.3 The Lyons Review Inquiry into local government in England⁸, part of which examines the role and functions of councils, offers a point of reference, accepting that local government in Northern Ireland is quite different from the rest of the United Kingdom. Therein Lyons sees the key strategic role of local government as being one of '**place shaping**' going well beyond the provision of individual services – much of it is political requiring discussion, debate and compromise in order to make difficult but essential choices and trade-offs. Lyons sees the roles of local government in England as essentially threefold:
- (a) ***Dealing with different preferences, making choices and resolving differences.*** Elected local government is the forum for making the political choices and decisions that have to be made about local priorities, and dealing with the inevitable disagreements between local groups and areas, in order to maintain the cohesiveness of the community. It therefore performs not only an important social and democratic role, but also a key one in promoting overall welfare.
 - (b) ***Engaging with local people, and understanding local circumstances.*** Local knowledge is necessary for services and functions to be delivered effectively and efficiently. It is much more difficult and can cost more, for central government to develop this knowledge than it is for a local authority or other local body.

Councillors live locally and are directly accountable to local residents. This provides a local authority with a better understanding of local preferences and the costs of delivering services in that area. Local authorities can deliver services in a more responsive fashion, based on the needs of individuals and groups in their areas.

- (c) ***The capacity and responsibility to deal with complex problems and situations.*** Complex problems have to be tackled through a range of interventions by a number of different services. There is a host of different organisations with a role in the success of the area, all of which need to work together to achieve successful outcomes. Local authorities are part of a network of local governance, working with other agencies and organisations⁹.
- 2.4 Given the scale of local government in Northern Ireland and its smaller functional remit, notwithstanding increased responsibilities under the RPA, the above roles may appear slightly abstract, although not without resonance. Locally, NILGA outlined what it saw as three key but interdependent roles for local government in Northern Ireland¹⁰. Therein NILGA suggests one key objective for councils: to help create and sustain the social, environmental and economic conditions to enable our communities to thrive.
- 2.5 Central to achieving this objective is councils performing roles in civic leadership, service delivery and local enablers:
- (a) ***Civic Leadership.*** Civic leadership through local councils should provide the bridge between the citizen and the institutions of government. To facilitate this leadership role, councils would have defined and vibrant relationships with other public agencies, the voluntary/community sector, young people, the private sector and other social partners. Elected members play a vital role in this process. They act to balance the various sets of interest and the apportioning of scarce resources for the common good.
- (b) ***Service delivery.*** Councils should seek to deliver modern services which are democratically accountable, integrated, innovative and demonstrate value for money. They should be provided in a manner which increases accessibility of citizens to those council services. Services should be designed with the citizen in mind. Government at every level exists to serve the public, rather than the other way around. Therefore elected members must have effective mechanisms to hold regional and other agencies to account. Local government modernisation must involve changing cultures, not just structures.

(c) **Enablers.** While councils, where possible, should be the principal service provider at local level, they also have a role in supporting and influencing the work of others to ensure local development is sustainable. Councils should act as the 'hub of the wheel' in a local community, helping to ensure that joined up solutions are provided to local problems. Both central government departments and other statutory bodies are often established and monitored in a fashion which encourages silo mentalities. Councils are likely to be the only body which can give an overview on any problem and perspectives to the issues facing that community. Councils must therefore be at the forefront of challenging existing practice and the development of new co-ordinated approaches.

2.6 It is within this context of a radical overhaul of arrangements for local government in Northern Ireland, which demand a change in mindset about its future role, that we now turn to consider how councils can engage positively with central government in the future. Local authorities, embracing the changes under the RPA, will come to this relationship with central government re-energised, stronger and receptive to a partnership for the common good, recognising the potential for mutual dependence and trust. Before considering the practical mechanisms for central local relations, it is however important to define what we mean by such a relationship.

3. DEFINING CENTRAL-LOCAL RELATIONS

- 3.1 What precisely do we mean when we talk about central local government relations? In simple terms one might assume that it is a fairly straightforward task to delineate the roles of local councils and civil service departments in Northern Ireland and devise a means by which the two sectors engage. But the issue is more complex. Local governments are embedded in webs of relationships with other local authorities (e.g. tourism, economic development, environmental health), with national and European institutions (e.g. UK departments - Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs over BSE & bird flu; PEACE, Interreg EU initiatives) and with regional bodies (e.g. the Northern Ireland Housing Executive). The government of a locality cannot therefore be viewed in isolation – there are multiple levels at which governing institutions operate. These levels interact in numerous, often complex ways. On occasion the relations are hierarchical not least during periods of Direct Rule in Northern Ireland where ministers seek ‘to command’ (e.g. new rating system, water charges, education reform, RPA), but more commonly, networks of governing institutions are joined in subtle ways: they are obliged to co-operate with each other, to bargain and often to try and manipulate each other¹¹. In short, we have a multi-level system of governance which defies simply drawing the boundaries for central local relations around the new councils and the 11 government departments.
- 3.2 The complexity of central local relations, despite aspirations for reduced bureaucracy under the RPA, is unlikely to diminish. For example, the new powers of community planning given to local government will require (by law) government agencies to work with councils in developing and delivering plans for the social, economic and environmental welfare of their areas. The production of community plans will typically involve the health and social care local commissioning groups, education bodies, police, housing, voluntary and community sectors and the private sector. For example the new local health and social care groups will commission services required by their communities within the new councils. It would be inconceivable that there is not a close relationship between the local commissioning groups and the new councils.
- 3.3 This illustrates the fact that government at the local level is a series of interconnected networks that require management and co-ordination rather than a hierarchy that needs to be subject to ‘command and control’. **Therefore, to understand central local relations as simply a formal mechanism for exchange between local councils and central government departments would represent a failure to appreciate that what happens in local service delivery is not local ‘administration’ or even local ‘government’ but local ‘governance’.** This was, at least in part, recognised schematically in the consultation document produced by the RPA – see figure 3.1:

TWO-TIER MODEL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

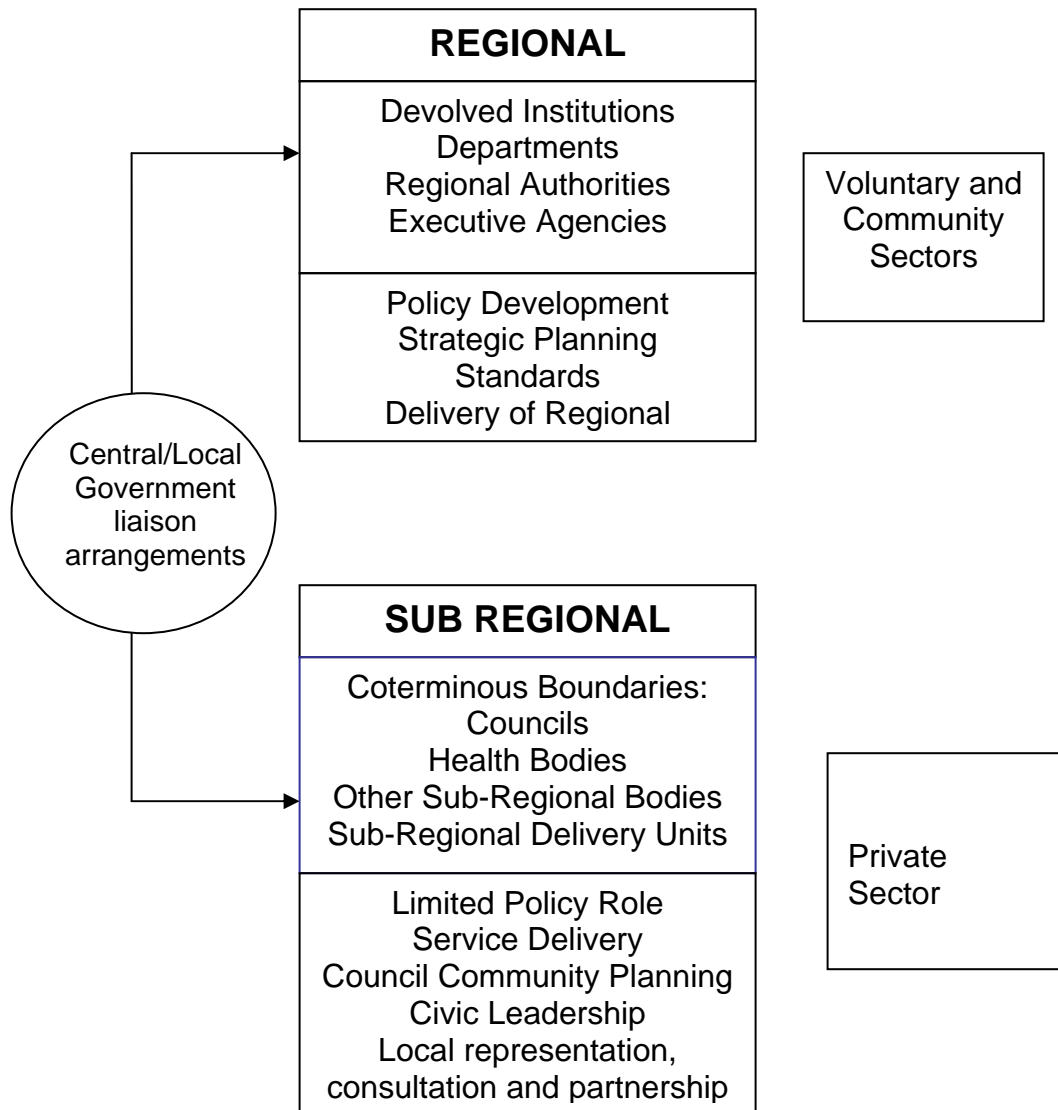


Figure 3.1: Source - Review of Public Administration

- 3.4 In defining central local relations our discussions thus far would suggest that to conceive such a relationship as between the 11 government departments and new councils is simply too narrow. Researchers in the field of central local relations put this more succinctly by arguing that 'the prevailing governance environment is one in which there is no single central-local relationship; it is possible to describe a myriad of relationships that co-exist and overlap'¹². Hence our attempt in this report to generate a 'one size fits all' model is unlikely to encompass the complexity of multi-level governance in practice.
- 3.5 The central-local subgroup considered the nature of existing arrangements and found them to be informal and *ad hoc*¹³. In particular, the subgroup considered central government relations with NILGA, the Chief Executives' Forum, Belfast Chief Executives' Group, and professional/issues based groups.

3.6 **NILGA**

NILGA does not currently have a statutory partnership with Government. Informal arrangements have been established, but NILGA has and will continue to lobby for central / local relations to be given a statutory framework. A policy paper was produced in 2003 which set out options for developing central / local relations. Further research has been conducted in preparation for the RPA.

Current arrangements are as follows:

- NILGA (NILGA Office Bearers) holds quarterly meeting with the Minister of State, previously Lord Rooker. Agreement was recently reached with the Minister to enable other Ministers to attend these meetings as appropriate.
- NILGA can ask for ad-hoc meetings with Ministers on specific issues. To date, requests have been well received and meetings have been held with Ministers on the RPA and rating reforms.
- Government Departments would ask NILGA to nominate or identify appropriate officers from the local government sector to participate in working groups or consultations.

NILGA is keen to improve the development and implementation of policy across Northern Ireland. Feedback from NILGA suggests that policy development is more effective when central government involves local government at an early stage. This is demonstrated by the recent collaboration between local Environmental Health Officers and the DoE on legislative changes to housing which ensured policy changes were understood and therefore quickly and easily introduced.

3.7 **Chief Executives' Forum**

Established in 1991, the Chief Executives' Forum is the association of chief executive officers of public bodies in Northern Ireland. The Forum is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. The Forum includes more than 150 public sector bodies including Government Departments, their agencies, local government and non-departmental public bodies. Its purpose is to provide an inter-agency forum within which new ideas and approaches can be explored and developed as the public sector seeks to modernise and improve the ways in which it goes about its business and the delivery of public services.

3.8 **The Belfast Chief Executives' Group**

The Belfast Chief Executives' Group (BCEG) comprises the Chief Executives of:

- Belfast City Council
- Belfast Education and Library Board
- Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education
- Eastern Health and Social Services Board
- North and West Health and Social Services Trust
- South and East Health and Social Services Trust.

The Group was subsequently extended to include the Department for Social Development which is responsible for Urban Regeneration and Community Development.

The Group meets on a quarterly basis with the aim of providing a high level approach to addressing challenges within the City in a strategic way, identifying opportunities for joint working and information sharing, thereby promoting "joined-up" government. In the past the Group has commented upon issues such as neighbourhood renewal and the proposed development of a Good Relations Plan for Belfast.

3.9 Professional / Issue Based Groups

In order to support improved policy development and integration, a number of professional or issue-based groups have been established. Examples include:

Name of Group	Issue / Purpose
NIBRAC	Building Regulations and development of associated policy. Includes Building Control Officers across NI ¹⁴ .
LGEMG	Local Government Emergency Management Group – Emergency Planning. This is a joint arrangement between local government, DOE Local Government Division and the Central Emergency Planning Unit of NIO
Socitm – Northern Ireland Branch	The NI Regional Branch of Socitm (Society of Information Technology Management) was established in January 2005. The Regional Committee is representative of Local Government staff and NI Civil Service staff with responsibility for the management of the IT function and the delivery of transformational projects in government bodies in the region. The Branch’s strategic aim is to inform and support the reform agenda for government in NI, through collaboration, education, research and communication.
Chief Environmental Health Officers Group (CEHOG)	CEHOG have a number of established specialist groups that interface with a range of government departments e.g. the Northern Ireland Pollution Group has Officers from DOE sitting on it to provide for liaison, and a mechanism for pre – consultation on proposed legislative changes.

Many of the main officer groupings within local government e.g. SOLACE, the Technical Advisory Group (TAG), the Association of Local Government Finance Officers Group (ALGFO) and the Chief Environmental Health Officers Group have developed their own relationships with relevant government departments and have also provided policy support to NILGA

- 3.10 The above examples serve to highlight the collection of informal and *ad-hoc* arrangements which currently exist. Our report is not attempting to discourage existing relationships, rather to provide a firmer legislative footing for central-local relations in recognition that other associations which currently exist will continue as a healthy element of multi-level governance.

4. MECHANISMS TO ENHANCE CENTRAL LOCAL RELATIONS

4.1 In considering central local relations in Great Britain, Professor John Stewart, the doyen of local government experts, argues that Scotland and Wales offer more useful examples than England because of their necessary responses to devolution arrangements. He draws an important distinction in the relations between central government and the Local Government Association (LGA), and local authorities more generally. In fact Stewart is critical of the top down nature of central local relations in England:

The stress on command and control limits local choice and reduces the capacity for diversity through innovation and initiative that should be one of the strengths of effective local government. The failure to recognise the need for fundamental change in central local relations remains a major weakness in the modernisation programme¹⁵.

4.2 The creation of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly prompted renewed thinking about the relationship between the centre and locality and therefore provide better comparators for Northern Ireland. Although Northern Ireland has not yet resumed full devolved arrangements, the Review of Public Administration, initiated by the local assembly but delivered by direct rule ministers, offers the same opportunity to modernise the nature of central local relations¹⁶. Of course what is interesting here is whether in the absence of fully working devolved government in Northern Ireland, the issue of central local relations is relevant. Developing central local relations is predicated on having 'a centre' – a fully functioning devolved and operational local Executive and Assembly. In the absence of such political progress, direct rule ministers would, of necessity, constitute 'the centre' and relationships between central and local government conducted accordingly.

4.3 What is also interesting and distinctive in the Northern Ireland case, by comparison with other parts of the United Kingdom, is that even in the reformed local government system with new and enhanced services, the Assembly's dependence on local authorities for service delivery is relatively limited. Core functions such as education, health and social services will still remain centrally controlled. The remit of the civil service and its agencies has been relatively untouched by the RPA. Hence the need or propensity for a partnership of equals is less obvious in the circumstances of Northern Ireland. In other words, there is asymmetry in the power dependence relationship. It becomes all the more important in Northern Ireland, therefore, to establish good central local relations as a counterbalance to a highly centralised system.

- 4.4 Accepting the distinctiveness of Northern Ireland, it is helpful to consider the experience of other devolved regions. The Scottish reforms came in the shape of the McIntosh Commission (Sir Neil McIntosh also sat as an expert on the RPA team in Northern Ireland) which in its final report argued that ‘relations between local government and the (Scottish) Parliament ought to be conducted on the basis of mutual respect and parity of esteem’¹⁷. However, a recent evaluation of central local relations in Scotland since the advent of a Scottish Parliament in 1999 concludes:

Scottish local government has not experienced the type of shift in central local relations that had been hoped for by those who campaigned for a more vital local democracy as part of a genuinely equal partnership between the Scottish Executive and local councils. Continuity is far more prominent than change.. Fundamental patterns of political relationships essentially remain the same. Scottish local authorities still struggle to shift the balance of power towards the locality¹⁸.

The research therefore suggests that the overall pattern of central-local relations is little changed from the pre-devolution period, which is partly explained by the self-interest of Scottish Executive Ministers to retain control over local government. If, for example, local authorities had greater financial freedoms and could act free of central constraints, this would almost certainly have political repercussions for the Scottish Executive.

- 4.5 The Welsh reforms appear to be particularly relevant in our deliberations on the future of central local relations in Northern Ireland and hence we consider these in greater detail than either the English or Scottish experience¹⁹. In particular we focus on the 4 formal mechanisms which regulate central local relations in Wales:

- **The Partnership Council**
- **The Welsh Local Government Association**
- **Professional Associations**
- **Policy Agreements**

We consider each of these mechanisms in turn.

- 4.6 **Partnership Council:** The Partnership Council lies at the heart of the formal relationship between the Assembly and local government in Wales. The Partnership Council is a **statutory** body (unlike the English equivalent; the Scots do not have a similar partnership council) arising from the Government of Wales Act 1998 which required the Assembly to adopt a scheme for a partnership with local government. It is set up to promote joint working and co-operation between the Assembly and local government. It comprises 25 members from the Assembly (all parties),

local government (drawn mainly from the Welsh LGA) but also includes representatives of the National Park Authorities, police and fire authorities and two members from the community councils. The remit of the Partnership Council is:

- To give advice to the Assembly about matters affecting the exercise of any of the Assembly's functions.
- Make representations to the Assembly about any matters affecting, or of concern to, those involved in local government in Wales.
- Give advice to those involved in local government in Wales.

4.7 The Partnership Council works by consensus evidenced by standing orders which provide that 'wherever possible, the papers to be discussed at Partnership Council will be joint papers – representing the views of the Assembly and local government. Where there is disagreement as to approach or policy, this will be recorded in the papers'²⁰. The Partnership Council is supported by a joint official secretariat of officials from the National Assembly for Wales and officers of the Welsh Local Government Association. Initially the First Minister chaired the Council but has since delegated this to the local government minister. Most of the real work of the Council however takes place in its working or task groups where politicians, Assembly officials, local government officers and other interested parties address specific topics. They have produced reports, for example, on: political management structures, community strategies, policy agreements and performance indicators, procurement, Best Value, and school performance. That said, the Partnership Council is not, nor was it intended to be, a decision making body, rather it has an advisory role.

4.8 Welsh Local Government Association: The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) was founded in 1996, following the reorganisation of local government – it is a representative association, but membership is voluntary and it relies on member authorities' subscriptions. At the outset a key role of the WLGA was to act as a think tank for Welsh affairs because of a policy development deficit in the Assembly. As the Welsh Assembly's policy capacity expanded, the WLGA moved from a proactive to reactive role feeding the machinery of government by advising on implementation rather than policy formulation. There is now a tension in that the Association is working to an Assembly rather than local government agenda. Even so, the research shows that 'the Welsh Local Government Association, as the collective voice of local government, has had an important impact on the Assembly'²¹.

4.9 Parallels with Northern Ireland are fairly obvious here. The Northern Ireland Local Government Association was established in 2001 (replacing the Association of Local Authorities for Northern Ireland - ALANI) to represent the interest of local authorities (their strapline 'The Voice of

Local Government') and has successfully secured all-party and all-Council membership. It has been proactive in policy development on issues such as waste management, water charges, and Sellafield. Interestingly, for the work of this Taskforce sub-group, NILGA produced a paper (entitled 'Building the Policy Capacity of Local Government in Northern Ireland': August 2003) on 'how local government could more effectively relate to central government' and proposed a central/local government mechanism modelled on the joint government voluntary & community sector forum.

- 4.10 Researchers have raised two issues of concern in relation to representative institutions of local government in Great Britain. First, Stewart sees local government associations as 'almost a contradiction in terms' as they must 'reduce diversity to the enforced uniformity of an association view' in defending and promoting local government interests at the national or regional level²². Given the political sensitivities around its predecessor, NILGA is keen to avoid 'diversity' but tensions do emerge as the very public debacle of its position on the proposed number of councils in the RPA illustrated. Second, there is a tension facing local authority associations – how to influence the centre without being co-opted by it²³. In the context of Northern Ireland this tension could be more heightened where 69 of the 108 MLAs are also sitting councillors. With the withdrawal of the dual mandate however, this may prove less problematic although it makes the case for a much more formalised mechanism to conduct central local relations.
- 4.11 Professional Associations: Devolution in Wales offered professional associations the opportunity to lobby on behalf of their service specialisms or promote the interests of local government more generally. Civil servants in the Welsh Assembly have welcomed the active involvement of professional associations, acutely aware of the limitations of their own policy making resources. One criticism of this kind of professional influence is that devolved structures can lead to producer or profession-driven arrangements rather than consumer led policies. In other words, professionals may be concerned about their own interests in the first place and thereafter the needs of public services users.
- 4.12 The research on Wales suggests that the influence which professional associations can have on central local relations is significant because of its small scale polity where everyone knows everyone else²⁴. The same, of course, could apply in the context of Northern Ireland. Equally, civil servants in the Welsh Assembly have seen the professions as potential allies in their efforts to raise the quality of local service delivery. Whether the same would be true in Northern Ireland, given the (still) limited role of local government in service delivery, is less clear.

- 4.13 Policy Agreements: Policy Agreements were introduced in 2001 to draw an explicit link between local and national priorities and to set out specific measures of success so that the public could see whether progress was being made. They were negotiated between the Welsh Assembly and each of the 22 local authorities in Wales. They consist of two parts: first, a written Agreement between the Assembly and the Council; second a series of specified targets or indicators against which the Council's performance will be measured. The written Agreement contains both common items setting out the context and expectations of the Agreement and specific items negotiated with each particular council. The Policy Agreements are also linked to the Welsh Assembly's core strategic document *Better Wales* through a vision statement and priority themes. The Agreements are in place for 3 years and a specific grant is attached to them payable in two parts – the first for concluding the Agreement, and the second for achieving the targets set at the completion of the duration period. The targets are set so that they provide 'a real improvement over existing levels of attainment and are compatible, when taken together with targets set by other authorities across Wales, with progress towards national or European targets where they exist'²⁵. In short, Agreements set out the council's commitment to deliver specific improvements in performance and the Government's commitment to reward these improvements.
- 4.14 Policy Agreements are about finding a middle ground between the Welsh Assembly's desire to specify policy priorities and local government discretion. They are based on the principles that the local authority and the Assembly are partners and that the local authority's decisions should involve shared strategic priorities. The Agreements have been supported by providing £30 million over the first 3 years as a reward for initial compliance. The performance incentive grants to local authorities can be used as they see fit. Unlike English Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) the Welsh Policy Agreements have fewer targets, are not based on a contractual model and have a much weaker element of payments by results. See figure 4.1 showing an example of a current Policy Agreement.

Figure 4.1
Example: Policy Agreement – Cardiff City Council

This Agreement is between the City and County of Cardiff and the Welsh Assembly Government. It sets out our shared vision and priorities and how we will measure success over the 3 years from April 2004 to March 2007.

There are four strategic priorities which we will focus on as we turn our vision of a sustainable future for Wales into reality:

- Helping more people into jobs.
- Improving health.
- Developing strong and safe communities.
- Creating better jobs and skills.

We have chosen the following as key measures of progress [*first theme only is outlined here for the purposes of illustration*].

Helping more people into jobs

1. Through Training and Enterprise Centres the Council will assist at least the following numbers of people into work:

	Baseline	2004/05	2005/06 (cumulative total)	2006/07 (cumulative total)
<i>Number of people</i>	2,256	2,000	4,000	6,000

2. We will seek to increase the rates of attendance in secondary schools. Our targets for this will be:

	Baseline	2004/05	2005/06 (cumulative total)	2006/07 (cumulative total)
Rate of attendance	88.8%	89%	90%	90%

3. We will aim reduce the percentage of 15 year olds leaving full-time education, training or work based learning without an approved external qualification. Our targets for this are as follows:

	Baseline	2004/05	2005/06 (cumulative total)	2006/07 (cumulative total)
As a % of all pupils	4.8%	4.4%	4.2%	4%

- 4.15 The potential for such a policy mechanism to regulate central local relations in Northern Ireland is perhaps obvious. The Northern Ireland Secretary of State in his announcement on the outcomes of the Review of Public Administration noted:

The Assembly will have a role in overseeing the performance of local government. It will wish to consider whether a system of performance assessment like that in England is appropriate²⁶.

In a similar vein, Lord Rooker's elaboration on the specific changes for local government made clear that the functions transferring to local councils would be accompanied by appropriate funding. This will require a new system of local government finance. The Minister promised 'to work closely with local government to develop these new arrangements'²⁷.

- 4.16 Discussions could take place within the Northern Ireland equivalent of the Partnership Council and form part of any 'Policy Agreement' between the new local authorities and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Policy Agreements would also seek to reflect the priorities of the Government outlined in its strategy document *Delivering a Better Future for Northern Ireland: Government Priorities and Budget (2006-08)*. The stated priorities are:

- **Economic growth.**
- **Public sector reform.**
- **High quality public services.**
- **A society based on partnership, equality, inclusion and mutual respect.**

- 4.17 Bearing in mind the Welsh experience we now consider how best central local relations could be established in the Northern Ireland, given its very different arrangements for local government, the absence of a fully devolved Assembly, and a much more centralised system of public administration in which civil servants and local government officials traditionally see themselves as inhabiting very different worlds.

5. MODELLING CENTRAL-LOCAL RELATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

- 5.1 The primary outcome of the sub-group's deliberations was the need for a formal legislative mechanism to regulate/moderate the relationship between central and local government in Northern Ireland. The core elements of that relationship would include: a Partnership Panel (our preferred title), Local Area Agreements, a lead Communities and Local Government Division possibly within OFMDFM and Minister for the sector, all bound by a set of partnership principles. This framework draws on the successful Welsh model of central local relations suitably adapted for circumstances in Northern Ireland. In considering the key elements of an adapted model which could best fit the changing public sector environment (emerging from the RPA) in Northern Ireland, the sub-group arrived at the following conclusions, in no order of importance, set out below.
- 5.2 **Advocacy:** Both in symbolic and practical terms, there is a need for a core communities and local government division within the civil service, headed by a Minister for Communities and Local Government. The proposed Division for Communities and Local Government must be seen to be at the centre of government and it is suggested that it be located in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFM&DFM). This was seen to offer several advantages. First, OFM&DFM is at the centre of government and hence the status of local government, by association, would be enhanced. Second, a Division for Communities and Local Government within OFM&DFM is better positioned to argue for a larger slice of the public sector cake in public expenditure negotiations. Third, given the emphasis within community planning on securing commitment from central government players, there is the potential for a Division for Communities and Local Government to influence 'joined-up' commitment. Fourth, the newly created (May 2006) Department for Communities and Local Government in Whitehall offers a useful comparator. Therein the department has a powerful new remit to promote community cohesion and equality, as well as responsibility for housing, urban regeneration, planning and local government. The conjunction of communities and local government in the Northern Ireland context symbolises a new era for councils which will have direct responsibility for *inter alia* urban and rural regeneration and community planning. There are, of course, some sensitivities around increasing staff numbers in OFM&DFM given the very public controversy surrounding its scale (larger than the Prime Minister's Office).

5.3 The sub-group also proposes that the Division for Communities and Local Government is headed by a Minister. Her/his main role would include:

- to act as a champion for local government as a sector;
- to set policy and priorities, taking advice from the Partnership Panel;
- to promote the wider brief of communities and local government as reflected in his/her title including civic leadership/renewal and community cohesion within councils, urban and rural regeneration, and to offer support for community planning and the power of well being;
- to agree with the local government sector minimum regional (NI wide) targets whilst ensuring that councils have the necessary resources to deliver on these;
- to oversee a performance assessment mechanism'
- to play a key role in negotiating financial allocations for the local government sector; and
- to put in place and oversee a modernisation agenda²⁸.

Importantly, the Minister would not be accountable for the business of local authorities which would rest with the elected councils. We suggest that the arrangements set out here for advocacy (a dedicated division and minister) should be put in place whether Direct Rule continues or full devolution is restored.

5.4 **Political liaison:** The composition of the Partnership Panel in a new era of local government in Northern Ireland needs to be a body with considerable clout and mutual respect between the sectors. Given our relatively small scale, we suggest a body comprising: local councillors representing the sector through each local authority (one per new council) and the 5 largest political parties (one from each party); the First Minister or Deputy First Minister as chair of the Partnership Panel; the Minister for Communities and Local Government; and selected ministerial colleagues. The Partnership Panel will be supported by Council Chief Executives, Chief Executive of NILGA and Permanent Secretaries to the attending Ministers. These officials will be part of the conversation which takes place in the Partnership Panel but without voting rights or decision-making powers.

5.5 The day-to-day business of the Partnership Panel will be through a joint secretariat made up of NILGA officials and civil servants from the Division for Communities and Local Government. The Sub-Group proposes that the Partnership Panel will:

- (a) Give advice to the Assembly (or Secretary of State) on matters affecting the exercise of any of the Assembly's functions,

- (b) Make representations to the Assembly about matters affecting those involved in local government in Northern Ireland, and
- (c) Give advice to those involved in local government in Northern Ireland.
- (d) Negotiate the regional priorities of Local Area Agreements.

Papers coming to the Partnership Panel should, where possible, be joint papers. Joint working groups will also be established to consider, in detail, key issues of mutual concern, comprising appropriate local officials, civil servants and politicians linked to the topics under consideration. The central local relationships conducted through the proposed Partnership Panel will be legally based (stipulating composition of the Panel, frequency of meetings, status of the decisions taken etc.).

- 5.6 An important consideration here is how local councillors will be selected for the Partnership Panel. The sub-group recommends that selection comes within the purview of NILGA and reflects both, political parties and each of the councils. Typically from councillors nominated by each local authority to NILGA, one member will be selected by the council to sit (directly) on the Partnership Panel, representing his/her council as a sectoral appointee. This process must be transparent and in strict compliance with the principles of good governance and proportionality. The remaining councillors will become ordinary members of NILGA from which 5 will be selected to represent the 5 largest political groupings/parties – these might be described as the NILGA Cabinet. We set out an example of this in figure 5.1

Example of councillor selection process to the Partnership Panel:

1. If, for example, a local council is eligible to allocate say 8 members to NILGA, then 1 member (from the 8) is nominated by the council to sit (directly) on the Partnership Panel.
2. The remaining 7 representatives from this council become ordinary members of NILGA.
3. From the overall body of all ordinary members, 5 party political groupings are selected via NILGA to represent each of the 5 largest parties on the Partnership Panel

As a result (if there are 7 new councils) the local government side of Partnership Panel will comprise a NILGA representation:

- 7 councillors nominated from each of the new councils
- 5 councillors representing the political parties.

Figure 5.1

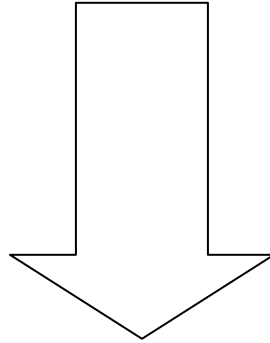
- 5.7 The process of nomination/election may demand further consideration within NILGA (they will, no doubt, want to agree their own arrangements) but should ensure fair representation across political parties and, by design, council areas. For example, in the course of the sub-group's deliberations we considered optional arrangements such as NILGA electing the sectoral representatives, as against these coming directly from councils' nominees to NILGA. This was discounted because of the need to ensure 'buy-in' from each of the new councils. Equally, we considered the possibility of councillors on the Partnership Panel having functional specialisms. Whilst theoretically plausible, in practical terms we concluded that the detail of specialist work would be best undertaken by working groups of the Partnership Panel.
- 5.8 It is important that those councillors emerging from the selection process represent the collective sectoral view of local government. The 'whole must be greater than the sum of the parts' – the 'parts' being councillors from each of the 5 largest political parties and individual local authorities. Equally, councillors acting as sectoral representatives on the Partnership Panel have a duty to receive input from, and report back to, the sector. This requires a formal feedback mechanism. In using NILGA as the nominating/electing body to the Partnership Panel it further consolidates NILGA's role as the voice of the sector (as opposed to the political parties) and, in so doing, provides a direct entrée to the central local forum for each of the new councils (whatever the number may be).
- 5.9 This may address some of the current weaknesses in the system. Belfast City Council, for example, because of its disproportionate size relative to other councils and large number of MLAs²⁹ currently tends to circumvent NILGA. With the abolition of the dual mandate and three of the new councils with comparable populations to Belfast³⁰ (under the existing boundaries), there is an opportunity to strengthen the role of NILGA as the representative body for the sector. If NILGA, as a voluntary association, is to be an integral part of the statutory Partnership Panel arrangement, some thought must be given to unforeseen events e.g. some councils withdrawing from NILGA. *In extremis*, councils as the statutory bodies and political parties can nominate outwith the NILGA rubric.
- 5.10 **Strategic and operational liaison:** Pivotal to the process of a working relationship between central and local government is some form of policy agreement(s). Public Service Agreements (PSAs) (contained in the Northern Ireland *Priorities and Budget 2006-08* document) are the key mechanism for holding central government departments to account. In view of their widespread currency, a framework based on PSAs was considered by the sub-group as a way of accommodating the mutual needs of both sectors. PSAs, however, were seen as being too directive from the centre and more appropriate for government departments,

accepting that whatever mechanism is applied it must meet the requirements of target setting and accountability against these targets. The potential for such a framework to be dominated by regional (Northern Ireland wide) priorities needs to be balanced with local policy objectives. The importance of community planning to articulate local priorities and feed these into some form of policy agreement offers an opportunity for 'a partnership of equals' approach.

- 5.11 The sub-group considered Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) and Local Area Agreements (LAAs) as alternative mechanisms for strategic and operational liaison from the experience of other parts of the UK. A Local Area Agreement is a three year agreement, based on local sustainable community strategies, that sets out the priorities for a local area agreed between central government, a local area (represented by the lead local authority) and other key partners through Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). LAAs are structured around four blocks or policy fields: children and young people; safer and stronger communities; healthier communities and older people; and economic development and enterprise. Government sets mandatory outcomes and indicators for each of the policy fields alongside locally determined priorities.
- 5.12 Local Public Service Agreements are a voluntary agreement negotiated between a local authority and the Government. The overall aim of LPSAs is to improve the delivery of local public services by focusing on targeted outcomes with support from Government. At the heart of local PSAs is an agreement between a council, its partners and government about the priorities for improvement locally. The agreements provide a way of maximising the impact on local communities of locally responsive public services combined with government's commitment to national standards. The strong partnership focus provides a way of marshalling all the resources of the public sector locally, alongside the contribution of the community, voluntary and private sectors, to focus on what most needs improvement in the area. Success in delivering agreed outcomes attracts a reward grant from government and there is a contribution at the outset to 'pump prime' the improvements. The Government has now incorporated all new LPSAs into LAAs as the 'reward element'.
- 5.13 Considering the experience elsewhere, the sub-group proposes the establishment of Local Area Agreements in Northern Ireland based (from the top-down) on the 4 policy fields³¹ outlined in the *Northern Ireland Priorities and Budget 2006-08* (or the equivalent *Programme for Government* in a returning Assembly) and (from the bottom-up) on locally determined priorities articulated via the community planning process. There must be a line of sight between local needs expressed through community planning and regional policy priorities (*Programme for Government: Priorities and Budget*) - see figure 5.2, although local plans

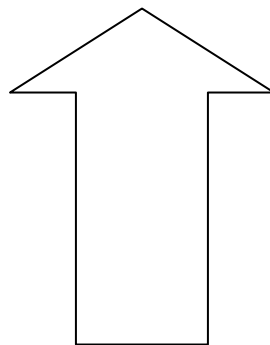
cannot be allowed to effectively veto ministers' policies. In short, the statutory duty for central government departments and agencies to work with local authorities through community planning should reinforce the engagement process voluntarily proposed in the Agreements. The resulting Local Area Agreements (for each of the councils) offer the opportunity for 'joined-up' government in which the key stakeholders (central and local government) are mutually accountable through the Partnership Panel – our proposal is depicted in figure 5.3.

TOP-DOWN
Programme for
Government
Priorities



Local Area Agreements:

- Common central targets and council-specific local needs
- Pump priming and rewards element



BOTTOM-UP
Community
Planning

Figure 5.2

Central Local Relations in Northern Ireland

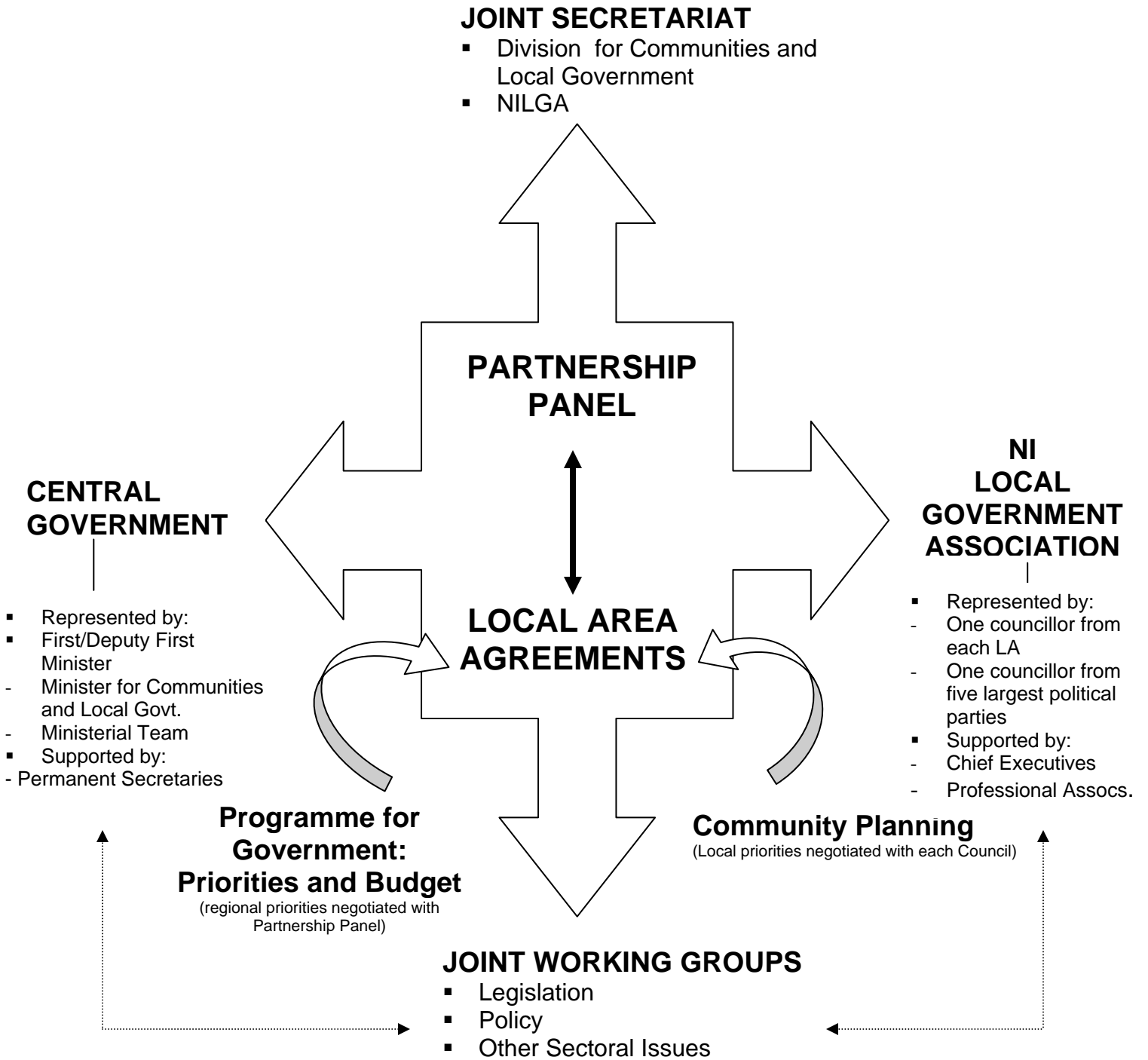


Figure 5.3

- 5.14 Joined-up thinking also informs how councils conduct business at the local level. This is where local authorities interact with other sectors in the direct provision or oversight of public services within their boundaries. In this model local government is at the hub of government departments and agencies operating in their areas – *primus inter pares*. They are the only democratically accountable body for people in the area and provide the link with local partners in the public, private, and voluntary and community sectors. By extension, local people can, through elections, exercise greater control over what is happening in their areas. This will drive public service delivery improvement. In this model (depicted in figure 5.4) the critical issue is not what services local authorities deliver, but rather their capacity to provide effective leadership to their areas and to bring together the key players from the public, private and voluntary/community sectors to work in partnership. If the new local authorities in Northern Ireland can act as leaders and partnership builders this will stimulate new models of service delivery, including cross-cutting approaches involving other public, private and voluntary/community agencies.
- 5.15 **Partnership principles:** None of the above will work unless it is based on mutual trust and understanding between central and local government. There is therefore a need to establish a set of partnership principles which both sectors can ‘sign up to’ as an overriding framework for collaboration. These principles must emphasise a ‘partnership of equals’ and move away from the prevailing slang that ‘size matters’ where local government is a small public sector spender and judged accordingly. The sub-group usefully drew on the work of Concordia and their experience of partnerships³². We have endorsed much of their work, which itself is informed by research emanating from the Scottish Executive, with minor adaptations and propose the following principles set out below.
- 5.16 The key principles that could help build strong partnerships were seen as being:
- **Trust** - this was taken to be a fundamental necessity of good partnership working.
 - **Mutual respect** - and acknowledgement of the fact that partners bring different things to the table. This included listening properly to different points of view and recognising the value of a diverse range of opinions.
 - **Openness** - or a ‘*willingness to be affected by the process*’ with partners being less attached to fixed outcomes, and more open to new ideas or approaches.
 - **Tolerance** - as healthy partnerships must be able to withstand robust exchanges of views, and allow space for disagreement.

- **Continuity** - because getting to know each other as individuals was considered key to building effective relationships and continuity of members was identified as another important factor.
- **Accountability** – each sector must be mutually accountable. The forum for accountability to be exercised is the Partnership Panel and the mechanism for so doing is the Local Areas Agreements.

5.17 It was suggested that there should be a framework for working in partnership and the important characteristics of such a framework were:

- **Shared vision** - without common overall aims and objectives there is little rationale for a partnership. Also, the scope and the limits of the partnership need to be clearly understood by all.
- **Agreement on remit and roles** - with time allocated at the outset to determine these responsibilities and subsequently to review them.
- **Clear terms of engagement** - agreed amongst partners to avoid misunderstandings and to set out what can reasonably be expected in terms of the conduct of business.
- **An appropriate life-span** - as specifically focused partnerships might be time limited whilst other wider partnerships might need time to grow and establish themselves.
- **Management of change** - there is a need to ensure continuity and to provide appropriate induction procedures for new members.

5.18 The sub-group took the view that each participating party needed to sign up to these principles, including the new councils, and the departments represented by their Ministers on the Partnership Panel. Without specifying the detail, there needed to be some repercussions last resort for participants in blatant breach of the principles. In short, the principles are more than a voluntary agreement based on warm words between central and local government – they must have sufficient clout to guide the transition to a relationship which will evolve and ultimately result in one based on mutual trust and respect.

'JOINED-UP' CENTRAL LOCAL RELATIONS

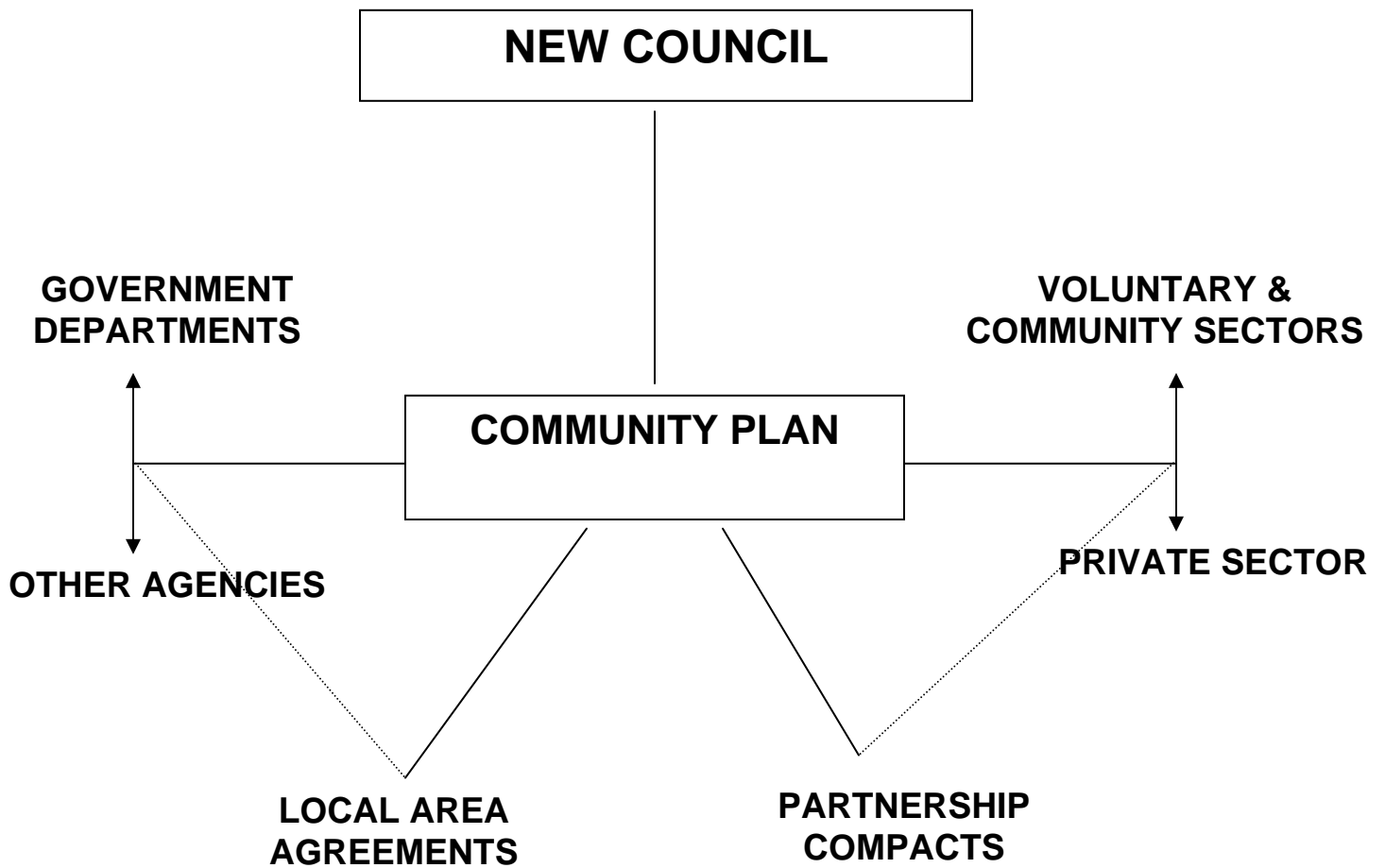


Figure 5.4

6. Summary and conclusions

The Sub-Group on Central Local Relations summarise their proposals, legislative requirements and implementation plans as follows:

6.1 Elements in the Central Local Relations Model

- (a) **Advocacy:** Establish a Minister for Communities and Local Government and a Division for Communities and Local Government within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.
- (b) **Political liaison:** Set up a Partnership Panel comprising:
 - First/Deputy First Minister (Chair)
 - Minister for Communities and Local Government and ministerial colleagues
 - Councillors representing local government sector
 - Councillors representing political parties
 - Supported by Chief Executives and Permanent Secretaries
 - Joint secretariat – NILGA and Division for Communities and Local Government.
- (c) **Local Area Agreements:** Jointly negotiate local area agreements with each council comprising: (top-down) regional priorities (contained in the Programme for Government: Budget and Priorities), and (bottom-up) local priorities (outlined in community plans). Pump priming and reward schemes should also be agreed as a core element of the local area agreements.
- (d) **Partnership Principles:** Secure agreement for, and endorsement of, partnership principles. This should include a mechanism (penalty) to hold to account those who default on the principles of partnership.

6.2 **Legislative requirements**

Establishing the Partnership Panel

1. The Northern Ireland Assembly (or the Secretary of State) shall establish and maintain a body known as the Partnership Panel for Northern Ireland comprising Members of the Northern Ireland Executive (or Direct Rule Ministers) and members of local authorities in Northern Ireland.
2. The Partnership Panel **will**:
 - (a) Give advice to the Assembly (or Secretary of State) on matters affecting the exercise of any of the Assembly's functions,
 - (b) Make representations to the Assembly about matters affecting those involved in local government in Northern Ireland, and
 - (c) Give advice to those involved in local government in Northern Ireland.
 - (d) Negotiate the regional priorities of Local Area Agreements.
3. The local authorities are those set up as a result of the Review of Public Administration 2005 and the Boundaries Commissioner established to determine the administrative boundaries of the new councils.

Membership of the Partnership Panel

4. Local authority representatives on the Partnership Panel will be appointed under the auspices of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) from members nominated by each council to NILGA. Appointments will take place as soon as possible after elections to the Assembly/Local Government for a fixed term period.
5. Through NILGA, there will be one councillor from each of the local authorities and one member from each of the five largest political parties appointed to the Partnership Panel.
6. The Partnership Panel will be chaired by the First or Deputy First Minister, supported by the Minister for Communities and Local Government and his/her ministerial colleagues with a local government interest.
7. Permanent Secretaries and Chief Executives to the relevant Ministers and local authorities respectively can attend in an advisory capacity.

8. The Partnership Panel may, at any time, make an appointment to fill a casual vacancy.

Cessation of Membership of the Partnership Panel

9. Membership of the Partnership Panel lasts until the next election of the Northern Ireland Assembly.
10. A member may resign at any time.
11. A member ceases to be a Partnership Panel member if he/she ceases to be a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly or a local authority.
12. A member ceases to be a Partnership Panel member if he/she ceases to be eligible for appointment to the Northern Ireland Assembly or a local authority.

Procedure of the Partnership Council

13. The Partnership Panel must meet at least quarterly and within 6 months of the Assembly election.
14. The procedure of the Partnership Panel shall be regulated by the standing orders made by the Assembly.
15. The Assembly shall consult local authorities in Northern Ireland and NILGA before making, or remaking or revising, the standing orders of the Partnership Panel.
16. The Partnership Panel standing orders will provide for the Partnership Panel to establish committees.
17. The membership of any committee established by the Partnership Panel shall be elected by the Partnership Panel from amongst its members. The number of local authority members will not exceed the number of Assembly members on committees.

6.3 **Implementation plans**

We recommend that the central local relations model be implemented from the establishment of shadow councils in October 2008. Importantly, however, we have been conscious during our work of its potential implications for the implementation of other sub-groups' activities – we are not operating in a vacuum. The most obvious areas of implementation overlap are in Taskforce sub-groups currently examining: community planning, governance, performance management, and capacity building. We have, for example, made explicit links in our work to the community plan as a feeder for Local Area Agreements, themselves a key aspect of the work of the Partnership Panel. We also see community planning within councils as the mechanism for cross-sectoral work and a 'joined-up' approach to service delivery at the local level. There may well be governance issues pertinent to how local authorities select or nominate members to NILGA, the cornerstone of our proposals in ensuring fair representation on the Partnership Panel. Local Area Agreements will, by their nature, involve regional and local target setting with associated performance management arrangements. There are also implications for capacity building amongst councillors and officers operating the proposed structures for central local government relations in the future.

On the latter issue, we recommend an immediate programme of capacity building which will encourage relationship building between central and local government. This could include, for example, job exchanges or secondments, joint seminars/conferences and other activities aimed at achieving mutual understanding in advance of the Partnership Panel being established. Importantly, capacity building will help to establish trust between the sectors and manage early expectations of what can be achieved through the Partnership Panel. The proposed central local mechanism cannot become an instant panacea for long-standing issues of concern. It will take time to bed-in and for results to become evident.

6.4 **Conclusions**

The key imperative at the outset in establishing the Local Government Taskforce was to consider in the first instance those legislative requirements necessary to take forward the outworkings of the RPA. This sub-group saw this as a rather narrow and limiting brief which proved difficult in practical terms to address without first locating our discussions in the wider framework of central local relations. We have therefore attempted to distil the legislative requirements from a more comprehensive narrative on the future shape of collaborative arrangements between central and local government in Northern Ireland. However, more detailed work is required given the brevity of time the sub-group had to complete the task in hand. For example, more work is needed on the key role played by NILGA (and its constitutional status) in these proposals including how we can learn from local government internationally, perhaps in collaboration with the Local Government Association and the Local Government International Bureau. We need to develop a Local Area Agreement exemplar and expand on the details of the pump-priming/reward elements. The task of modelling central local relations in Northern Ireland is far from complete.

One thing is clear to us however, structures and models do not, of themselves, create productive central local government relations. They are a necessary but insufficient condition for successful collaboration. This is a point which was reinforced through the useful advice given to the sub-group by Councillor Richard Kemp (LGA Liberal Democrats Leader) and Eleanor Kelly (former London Chief Executive) via the support of the IDeA. There must be a real human commitment to make a partnership work built on trust and respect. Until such time as this happens, and it will evolve rather than occur spontaneously, there must be recognition of mutual dependence ultimately leading to an improved quality of life for the citizens in Northern Ireland. Both local and central government face new and exciting opportunities and challenges emerging from the Review of Public Administration - the proposals we have outlined here attempt to capture more widely the good-will evident in our sub-group. The proposed central local model offers the prospect of integrated working to achieve the ultimate prize of better public services for Northern Ireland. We commend it to you.

Appendix 1

Membership of Sub-Group

Sub-Group on Central-Local Government Relations

NAME	ORGANISATION
Chairperson	
Wavell Moore	Coleraine Borough Council
Angela Fitzpatrick	DOE
Advisor	
Colin Knox	UUJ
Political Parties	
Naomi Long	Alliance
Mervyn Storey	DUP
Kate Lagan	SDLP
Stephen Huggett	Sinn Fein
Liz Johnston	UUP
SOLACE	
Stephen Finlay	SOLACE
Local Authorities	
Lorraine Crawford	Craigavon
Ken Webb	North Down
Esther Mulholland	Moyle
Alan Cardwell	Carrickfergus
Andrew Hassard	Belfast
Liam Flanagan	Limavady
Barny Heywood	Omagh
IDeA member peer	
Richard Kemp	Liverpool City Council
Eleanor Kelly	IDeA
IOD	
Colin Reid	Consilium Technologies
Consumer Council	
Eleanor Gill	Consumer Council
NICVA	
Michael Briggs	East Belfast Comm Development Agency
Central Govt Reps	
Barry Jordan	DRD Roads Service
Victor Douglas	DCAL
Drew Haire	OFMDFM
Gerry Arkins & Pauline Hughes	DoE
Seamus McCrystal	DFP
David McCune	DETI
Nigel Carson	DHSSPS
June Ingram	DEL (copied into papers)
Jim Wilkinson	Planning Service
Stephen Martin	DSD

Endnotes

¹ Statement by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the Outcome of the Review of Public Administration (22nd November 2005). Belfast: Northern Ireland Office.

² Lord Rooker: Reform of Local Government – Outcome of Review of Public Administration (22nd November 2005). Belfast: Northern Ireland Office.

³ Lord Rooker: Reform of Local Government – Outcome of Review of Public Administration (22nd November 2005). Belfast: Northern Ireland Office.

⁴ Local Government Taskforce: Terms of Reference (March 2006). Belfast: Department of the Environment.

⁵ The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: Further Consultation (March 2005): Belfast RPA Section 3.13 & 3.15: 26-27.

⁶ Lord Rooker: Reform of Local Government – Outcome of Review of Public Administration (22nd November 2005). Belfast: Northern Ireland Office.

⁷ Grace, C. (2006) 'Fitness for purpose in a year for living dangerously' in The Rethinking of Local Government: fitness for purpose in a year for living dangerously' SOLACE Foundation Imprint.

⁸ On July 2004, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer commissioned Sir Michael Lyons to undertake an independent inquiry to consider the case for changes to the present system of local government funding in England. The scope and length of the enquiry were extended to consider issues relating to the wider functions of local government and its future role in September 2005. Sir Michael Lyons released a consultation paper and interim report in December 2005.

⁹ Lyons Inquiry into Local Government – Consultation Paper and Interim Report (2005): page 29-30. Norwich: HMSO.

¹⁰ 'NILGA Commitments and a Vision for Local Government' (2006). Belfast: NILGA.

¹¹ Moran, M. (2005) *Politics and Governance in the United Kingdom*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 249.

¹² Sullivan, H, and Gillanders, G. (2005) 'Stretched to the Limit? The Impact of Local Public Service Agreements on Service Improvement and Central Local Relations' *Local Government Studies* 31 (4): 555-574.

¹³ Hassard, A. Heywood, B. and Webb, K. (2005) 'Strategic and Operational Relationships with Central Government: arrangements in Northern Ireland' Working Group from Central Local Relations Sub-Group.

¹⁴ The Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) is a statutory committee, established in 1973 (Article 5(4) of the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979) to advise the Department of Finance and Personnel on the amendment of building regulations including energy efficiency and conservation, fire safety, accessibility and sustainable buildings, environmental matters, safety of structure and provision of services. The

composition of the committee is aimed at providing a cross-section of experience from a wide range of interests and backgrounds related to the building industry.

¹⁵ Stewart, J. (2003) *Modernising British Local Government: An Assessment of Labour's Reform Programme*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 225.

¹⁶ Carmichael, P. and Knox, C. (2005) 'The Reform of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: From Principles to Practice' *Political Studies* 53 (4): 772-792.

¹⁷ Scottish Office (1999) *Report of the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament* (McIntosh Report). Edinburgh: Scottish Office: paragraph 20.

¹⁸ McConnell, A. (2006) 'Central local relations in Scotland' *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 72 (1): 73-84.

¹⁹ Information in this section of the paper draws on two key sources:

Laffin, M. Taylor, G. and Thomas, A. (2002) *A New Partnership? The National Assembly for Wales and Local Government*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Laffin, M. (2004) 'Is Regional Centralism Inevitable? The Case of the Welsh Assembly' *Regional Studies* 38 (2): 213-223.

²⁰ Joint Secretariat (2000) Protocol for the Handling of Partnership Council Business. National Assembly for Wales: Cardiff.

²¹ Laffin, M. (2004) 'Is Regional Centralism Inevitable? The Case of the Welsh Assembly' *Regional Studies* 38 (2): 219

²² Stewart, J. (2000) *The Nature of British Local Government*. London: Macmillan - page103.

²³ Rhodes, R. (1986) *The National World of Local Government*. London: Allen & Unwin – page 19.

²⁴ Boyne, G., Griffiths, P., Lawton, A. and Law, J. (1991) *Local Government in Wales*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

²⁵ <http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/localgovernment/partnershipworking/>

²⁶ Statement by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the Outcome of the Review of Public Administration (22nd November 2005). Belfast: Northern Ireland Office.

²⁷ Lord Rooker: Reform of Local Government – Outcome of Review of Public Administration (22nd November 2005). Belfast: Northern Ireland Office.

²⁸ The modernisation programme typically includes:

- (1) Community leadership or the role of local authorities working with their partners and with local people in meeting economic, social and environmental needs – this is given expression through community planning and the powers of well-being;
- (2) Democratic renewal building a new and active relationship between local authorities and their citizens – achieved through new political structures; and
- (3) Improving performance in meeting needs and in providing services – through the best value regime, comprehensive performance assessment and proposals on the reform of local government finance.

²⁹ Belfast City Council has 13 councillors who are also MLAs: Fred Cobaine, Diane Dodds, Nigel Dodds, Sir Reg Empey, David Ervine, Carmel Hanna,

Naomi Long, Alban Maginness, Fra McCann, Nelson McCausland, Michael McGimpsey, Alex Maskey, and Robin Newton.

³⁰ Belfast City Council has a population of 277,391. Three of the new councils will have similar populations under current boundaries (which are set to change) namely: Councils in the South (Craigavon, Armagh, Banbridge, Newry and Mourne) will have a population of 263,384; Councils around Antrim (Antrim, Carrickfergus, Lisburn and Newtownabbey) population 274,714; Down area (Ards, Castlereagh, Down and North Down) population 279,883.

³¹ The four priorities for government are: economic growth; public sector reform; high quality public services; and a society based on partnership, equality, inclusion and mutual respect.

³² Parker Associates & De Witt and Mercer (2006) *The Path to Partnership: Social Partnership in Northern Ireland and Beyond*: page 49. Concordia.