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GOVERNANCE SUB GROUP POLITICAL PARTY REPRESENTATIVES

MINUTES OF MEETING ON 7 JUNE 2006

AT LOUGH NEAGH DISCOVERY CENTRE

ATTENDEES:

Victor Brownlees	Armagh City & District Council (Chair)
Nora Winder	Armagh City & District Council
Gerry Miller	Belfast City Council
John Mathews	Alliance Party
Paul Butler	Sinn Fein
John O'Kane	SDLP
Billy Armstrong	UUP (representing Danny Kennedy)
Jonathan Huish	IDeA
Mylene Ferguson	DoE
Piers Dalgarno	DoE
Greg Magee	DoE

Apologies:	Peter Robinson	DUP
	Danny Kennedy	UUP

1. Following introductions the Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised that its purpose was to ensure he had an accurate picture of the opinions among the political party representatives following the bilateral meetings held previously. He advised that the aim of the sub group was to identify the key issues, consider what has to be legislated for and try to get a collective view on Governance.

Terms of Reference

2. The Chair asked if there were any further views on the group's terms of reference (ToR). No comments were made and the ToR were agreed.

Finding So Far

3. The Chair then gave a presentation on progress to date explaining how he had carried out a number of interviews with the individual party representatives, party policy officers, academics and representatives from the Scottish Executive and Departments in the Republic of Ireland. These interviews together with the input of the political representatives would inform an issues paper on Governance which would be presented to the Taskforce Working Group and Political Panel.

The Chair advised that the role of local government falls into three categories:

- Democratic Accountability

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- A sense of place
- The ability to bring together people and organisations.

He then went on to discuss the main issues that would have to be addressed.

Standards and Behaviour

4. The challenge is ensuring that the new Governance structures to be put in place are fit for purpose as the current system is not. The Chair advised of the need for a constitution or contract with citizens. A code of conduct will be required which is mandatory and has sufficient sanctions and greater performance assessment with an internal standards committee and external oversight. The representative from DOE legislative team advised the meeting that a working group was currently developing a Code of Conduct.

Councillor/Officer Relationships

5. There is also a need for a protocol to give a clear definition of roles and responsibilities and lines of accountability for councillors and officers. The Chair further advised that there should be designated and separate roles for posts such as Head of Paid Service, Monitoring Officer and Chief Financial Officer with robust appraisal systems for senior managers and the management team. The importance of capacity building for both elected members and chief executives was stressed and agreed.

Role of Councillors

6. Councillors should be civic leaders and representative of everyone in their district. The services they provide will greatly increase post RPA and they will be responsible for the development of both local and regional policy together with the implementation of Government policy. These roles and the tensions between them must be recognised and provided for.

Structures

7. New open and transparent structures will have to be put in place to deal with new regional responsibilities eg planning and building control. Local area committees or civic councils should be set up to retain local identities. The IDeA representative gave an explanation of the Welsh structures – a mix of cabinet and management board. He also agreed to provide a paper on the Welsh model for the next meeting. The importance of retaining a civic dignitary role was stressed which should be rotated among the parties. The Chair advised that this could be determined by the civic committee.

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Civic Responsibility Sharing

8. On the issue of sharing civic responsibility the Chair advised that from his previous talks with members, the general consensus was that a system of 50%+1 was insufficient. It was essential that minority groups have a voice. There was some discussion over proportionality and whether this should be set in legislation. It was suggested that the increased powers and decision making should not be left open to each council. It was also suggested that the increase in powers should result in power-sharing. The Chair advised that the general consensus emerging was a need to be prescriptive in primary legislation on proportionality and which models to be used with Ministerial approval being required for any other model. It was suggested that a quicker system of call-in would be required to ensure effectiveness and confidence – internal at first, then external and finally through the courts.

Local Engagement – accountability to citizens

9. On the issue of local engagement and accountability there would be a responsibility on councils to engage with citizens. Consideration should also be given to a citizen's petition and local referenda.

External Checks & Validation

10. The Chair advised that in addition to the Equality and Human Rights Commissions and the Ombudsman there is a need for an oversight commission and an increased role for the Audit Office. It was suggested that more than one external check would be required to ensure confidence from all sides but that any commission would have to be strong, flexible and have sufficient sanctions to make it effective. This was agreed in principle. Speed of resolution is essential to save time and money. It was suggested that bodies such as the Ombudsman tend to drag the process out. A new performance assessment model will be required. The Comprehensive Performance Assessment tool used in England has made the performance of councils much more open and visible however they are now moving to a new more flexible system. The Chair advised that another sub group was taking this work forward.

Councillor Participation in other Bodies

11. The Chair commented on the possibility of a conflict of interest where members serve on joint committees, cross border bodies, limited companies or other corporate bodies. It was pointed out though that there are no nominations now to outside bodies. Appointments are made based on the merits of the applicants.

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12. The Chair asked members to consider all the information that had been provided and consider what has to be legislated for, what else needs to be considered and what will go into the final report of the sub group.
13. The issue of flags and emblems was raised and it was agreed that the Department would provide a response on this.

Dates for meetings

14. Wednesday 14 June @ 9.30am at Lough Neagh Discovery Centre
Tuesday 27 June @ 9.30am at Seagoe Hotel, Portadown

Monday 12 June – Chairs' updates to the Political Panel

Tuesday 4 July – Chairs present final reports to Working Group

Monday 17 July – Chairs present final reports to Political Panel