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**To: Local Government Taskforce – Shared Services sub-group**

**Local Council Planning Functions  
Potential for Shared Service(s)  
A Discussion Paper**

## **1. Background**

The Review of Public Administration consultation paper published in March 2005 suggested, under a variety of structural scenarios, that local councils would have an enhanced role in the delivery of the planning process. Under the new arrangements announced through the RPA in November 2005 local councils will have executive responsibility for the delivery of the majority of planning functions, with central government maintaining a strategic role in relation to regional planning and dealing with regionally significant applications, as well as responsibility for co-ordination and performance setting / monitoring.

Specifically, local councils will assume responsibility for:

- acting as consultees on strategic/regional plans and policies including Planning Policy Statements;
- preparation of Development Plans;
- development control (excluding major applications);
- enforcement;
- property certificate service; and
- conservation issues, including consents related to listed buildings and grants.

Central government will have executive responsibility for:

- regional strategic planning, including finalising and amending the RDS and confirming that development plans conform with the RDS;
- the preparation of Planning Policy Statements;
- planning legislation;
- processing major applications / major projects;
- “calling in” specific applications from councils which raise policy issues;
- preparing guidance to councils on planning policy and development plans, including the preparation of Development Plans;
- providing guidance to councils in relation to development control and enforcement operations; and
- quality assurance, monitoring and setting standards.

## **2. Current Planning Service Delivery**

The Planning Service carries out a range of activities that promote the government’s key themes of sustainable development and creating a better environment. The agency’s aim is to plan and manage development in ways which contribute to a quality environment and seek to meet the economic and social

aspirations of present and future generations. This is met by developing and implementing government planning policy and the preparation of development plans, and at the frontline through its development control function, which encompasses processing applications, taking enforcement action, etc.

Currently Planning Service exists as a unitary organisation based on a 6 division model, with each covering existing Council areas. Each division delivers services in terms of the processing of planning applications, enforcement and provision of development plans for their own council areas. The divisional model allows uniformity in terms of process and procedure, but also facilitates the development of local knowledge, expertise and close working relations with other local bodies with an interest in the planning system.

Planning Service headquarters delivers central support to the divisional offices in terms of IT, legislation, HR in particular recruitment and career development, training, and procedural advice and guidance etc. HQ is also responsible for the delivery of some specialised services such as the processing of major applications and those relating to minerals, waste, etc. HQ also provides an advisory role to divisions in relation to landscape and retail issues.

### **3. Potential Shared Services**

At the shared service sub-group meeting it was suggested that two options for shared service delivery in respect of councils' planning functions post RPA be considered:

#### **Option A**

- all council planning functions delivered by a single shared service  
Under this option responsibility for planning functions would transfer to councils in accordance with the RPA, but councils would deliver those functions through a single shared service, rather than each council managing its own planning unit.

#### **Option B**

- specific planning functions  
Under this option, only specific council functions would be delivered via a shared service option, with the remainder being delivered by individual councils.  
Suggested areas that might be considered are:
  - i. HR/ Personnel / including recruitment, career development, etc.
  - ii. Property Certificates (provides a history of land use, primarily to legal profession)
  - iii. I.T.
  - iv. Processing of specialist applications, and provision of specialist advice eg. minerals, waste, landscape etc.

Tables 1 and 2 below analyse these options against 12 criteria based on the RPA principles. Against each principle shared or individual council delivery is considered in terms of whether there are benefits, disadvantages or no major difference

## 4. ANALYSIS

**Table 1: Option A**

RPA Principles/ Relevant Factors	Shared Service Delivery +/-/=	Individual Council Delivery +/-/=	Comment
Democratic accountability	-	+	More apparent through single council delivery
Community responsiveness and partnership working	-	+	
Cross-community concerns	=	=	
Equality and human rights	=	=	
Subsidiarity	-	+	Follows principle of local delivery
Quality/Consistency of service	+ / =	- / =	Benefits through shared arrangements, although disadvantage? <sup>s</sup>
Co-ordination and integration of services	+ / =	- / =	Economies of scale allow co-ordination of planning function through shared service, although within individual council there maybe possibilities of integration across council functions (building control, roads, etc.)
Efficiency and effectiveness	+ / =	=	Planning Service already sees local delivery as important for effective delivery.
Innovation and business organisation	+ / =	=	
Economies of scale	+	-	
Scarce resources	+	-	Particularly relevant to recruitment and retention
Ease of implementation	+ / =	=	

### Commentary

Shared Service delivery of councils' planning functions has the potential to bring benefits particularly in the areas of use of resources, economies of scale. Further, there are benefits in relation to quality and consistency, co-ordination and integration and ease of implementation. These benefits however could also be achieved through individual council delivery depending on the performance and monitoring regime, and the potential for integration across council services. A shared service might also offer efficiency and effectiveness advantages, and

opportunities for innovation although, again, similar possibilities might exist within a council structure. While a single shared service might be the easiest to implement administratively and operationally there are likely to be some additional legislative requirements. There are also disadvantages in terms of local accountability, responsiveness and subsidiarity, although appropriate governance arrangements for any shared service could ensure individual council responsibility for decisions, development plans, etc.

Council delivery on the other hand brings advantages in terms of local accountability, responsiveness and subsidiarity. Economies of scale bring disadvantages in terms of use of resources, and also the potential for less co-ordination, integration and quality and consistency.

In two areas there was considered to be no difference for either delivery model, equality and human rights and cross community concerns.

**Table 2**  
**i) PLANNING HR / PERSONNEL /**  
**eg. Recruitment and Career Development**

<b>RPA Principles/ Relevant Factors</b>	<b>Shared Service Delivery</b>	<b>Individual Council Delivery</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Democratic Accountability	-	+	
Community Responsiveness and partnership working	-	+	
Cross Community concerns	=	=	
Equality and Human Rights	=	=	
Subsidiarity	-	+	
Quality/Consistency of Service	+/=	+ / =	Planning personnel is too small a function to be delivered on a stand alone shared service basis. Could be delivered on shared basis as part of overall shared service (option A) or as part of overall council shared HR function
Co ordination and integration of services	+ / =	+ / =	HR/Personnel for Planning Service could be integrated with other council HR functions
Efficiency and Effectiveness	+	+ / =	

Innovation and business organisation	=	=	
Economies of scale	+	-	
Scarce resources	+	-	
Ease of implementation	=	=	

### Commentary

The sharing of the HR function for planning across councils does offer advantages in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, particularly in the areas of recruitment, career development and specialist training and development. For other non-planning specific HR issues (attendance, pay, performance regime, etc.) there would be little benefit, and indeed more advantages in integration with council HR units. It is also worth noting that by 2009, Planning Service's HR function will be exclusively focused on specialist planning staff recruitment, training and career management. All other HR functions will have transferred under central government initiatives such as e-HR to shared service arrangements.

### ii) PROPERTY CERTIFICATES

RPA Principles/ Relevant Factors	Shared Service Delivery	Individual Council Delivery	Comment
Democratic Accountability	=	=	Non controversial information service
Community Responsiveness and partnership working	=	=	
Cross Community concerns	=	=	
Equality and Human Rights	=	=	
Subsidiarity	=	=	
Quality of Service	=	-	
Co ordination and integration of services	=	- / =	
Efficiency and Effectiveness	+	-	
Innovation and business organisation	+	-	
Economies of scale	+	-	
Scarce resources	+	-	

Ease of implementation	+	-	
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### Commentary

Within the Planning Service the property certificates unit is a small centralised unit based in Fermanagh providing an NI wide service primarily to the legal profession. It provides the planning history of a property including information relating to roads, water and EHS. There are significant efficiency, resource and service delivery benefits to councils operating this as a shared service, there may also be potential for further benefits in terms of integration with council certification processes, such as building control.

### ii) I.T.

RPA Principles/ Relevant Factors	Shared Service Delivery	Individual Council Delivery	Comment
Democratic Accountability	-	+	Although service uncontroversial
Community Responsiveness and partnership working	=	=	
Cross Community concerns	=	=	
Equality and Human Rights	=	=	
Subsidiarity	-	+	
Quality/Consistency of Service	+	-	
Co ordination and integration of services	+	-	
Efficiency and Effectiveness	+	-	
Innovation and business organisation	+	-	
Economies of scale	+	-	
Scarce resources	+	-	
Ease of implementation	+	-	

### Commentary

Within the Planning Service, planning specific IT infrastructure and operating systems are delivered by a small centralised IT unit based in Belfast. The team is responsible for maintaining and developing the IT system and by 2009 will have introduced a major new ePlanning system ePIC, under a contract which will run to at least 2012. This system will provide online application submitting systems and

application tracking facilities for the public as well as back office workflow management for planners. The IT infrastructure will support the planning systems of both central and local government post-RPA. There are significant efficiency, resource and service delivery benefits to councils operating this as a shared service.

#### iv) SPECIALISMS

Eg. Minerals, Waste, Landscapes etc.

RPA Principles/ Relevant Factors	Shared Service Delivery	Individual Council Delivery	Comment
Democratic Accountability	-	+	
Community Responsiveness and partnership working	-	+	
Cross Community concerns	=	=	
Equality and Human Rights	=	=	
Subsidiarity	-	+	
Quality/Consistency of Service	+	-	
Co ordination and integration of services	+	-	
Efficiency and Effectiveness	+	-	
Innovation and business organisation	+	-	
Economies of scale	+	-	
Scarce resources	+	-	
Ease of implementation	+	-	

#### Commentary

Within the Planning Service, specialist expertise is centralised within small HQ units which process local specialist applications and provide advice to divisions. The units also deal with regionally significant specialist applications and develop policy promote “best practice” in relation to their specialist areas. There are significant efficiency, resource and service delivery benefits to councils delivering their planning functions in this area as a shared service.

#### 4. Shared Service Delivery Mechanisms

For those functions detailed above which may be delivered on a shared service basis, it is considered that delivery could be undertaken in one of three ways:

1. a single agency on behalf of all councils
2. a single council on behalf of all councils
3. central government delivering the functions through a service level agreement with each / all councils

Table 3 below sets out for Options A and B, shared delivery options measured against efficiency, quality, economy and accountability.

**Table 3**  
**Option A – Single shared service for all council planning functions**

Shared Service delivery option	Efficiency	Quality	Economy	Accountability	Comment
Single Agency for all Councils	+	+	+	+	Governance arrangements will be critical.
Single Council on behalf of all Councils	+	=/-	+	-	Place a substantive management burden on one council. Accountability issues might be raised. No precedence in UK.
SLA with Central Government	+	=/-	+	-	Central Government has no responsibility for these functions and delivery might blur the lines between central and local responsibility

#### Commentary

Were shared service delivery to be considered, then the most appropriate approach would seem to be the creation of an Agency of local government with appropriate governance arrangements ensuring accountability of the Agency to councils and of councils to central government.

## Option B – Specific functions through a shared service

### i) PLANNING HR / PERSONNEL /

eg. Recruitment and Career Development

Shared service delivery option	Efficiency	Quality	Economy	Accountability	Comment
Single agency for all councils	-	-	-	+	Unit too small -economies of scale. Could only work in context of HR agency or single planning agency
Single council on behalf of all councils	=	=	=	=	Less control by councils over planning resources
SLA with central government	-	-	-	-	Central Government no direct responsibility not appropriate.

### Commentary

In light of economies of scale, planning specific HR functions would not appear suitable for a stand alone shared service outside of either a single shared service for all council's planning functions or a shared service for all council HR functions.

### ii) PROPERTY CERTIFICATES

Shared service delivery option	Efficiency	Quality	Economy	Accountability	Comment
Single agency for all councils	-	-	-	+	Too small
Single council on behalf of all councils	+	+	+	=	Potential linkage to other council certification functions
SLA with central government	-	-	-	-	Central government no responsibility for function

### Commentary

Were shared service delivery to be considered, then the most appropriate approach would seem to be delivery on behalf of all councils by a single council. Given the nature of the service this could probably be based on an SLA arrangement.

#### iii) I.T.

Shared service delivery option	Efficiency	Quality	Economy	Accountability	Comment
Single agency for all councils	-	-	-	=	Too small
Single council on behalf of all councils	-	-	-	=	Requires split of scarce resource between central and local government
SLA with central government	+	+	+	=	Shared service for IT for planning system both central and local. SLA mitigates against accountability issue

### Commentary

Were shared service delivery to be considered, then the most appropriate approach would seem to be delivery on behalf of all councils by central government, particularly given the nature of the service. IT support is provided for the Planning System including both central and local government, the service is largely non-controversial back office based, there is a small cohort of expertise which needs to be consolidated and there is potential to review in 2012.

#### iv) SPECIALISMS

Eg. Minerals, Waste, Landscapes etc.

Shared service delivery option	Efficiency	Quality	Economy	Accountability	Comment
Single agency for all councils	-	-	-	+	Too small

<b>Single council on behalf of all councils</b>	=	=	=	=	Requires split of scarce resource between central and local government
<b>SLA with central government</b>	+	+	+	=	Specialist support required by both central and local. SLA deals with procedures, decision issuing responsibility mitigates against accountability issues.

### **Commentary**

Were shared service delivery to be considered, then the most appropriate approach would seem to be delivery on behalf of all councils by central government, particularly given the nature of the specialist nature of service and its applicability to both central and local government. Currently approximately 60-70 % of these units activity would relate to central government responsibilities post RPA, and 30 - 40% councils. It would be impractical to split scarce resources between central and local government. In the UK county councils operate shared service arrangements for similar areas of work. Legislative responsibility mitigates accountability issues with, in effect, Councils being provided with advice and recommendations on specific applications or enforcement action but retaining responsibility for the decision. Under SLA provision arrangements this could be subject to periodic review and councils would not be prohibited from developing specialist expertise and delivering the service either singly or jointly.

## **5. Governance and Legislative Issues**

**Option A:** Under the option of delivery of all services on a shared service basis, new governance arrangements would need to be established to ensure that individual councils remain accountable for service delivery and to also ensure that the Agency is accountable to local government.

These governance arrangements would be mandatory, and all councils would need to sign up to the system. If councils opt out, then the viability of service delivery would come into question.

This option would probably require legislation for local government to require shared service delivery of all planning functions.

**Option B:** Under this option, governance arrangements will be covered by the development of an SLA between either the single council delivering the function and all other councils or councils and central government.

The SLA arrangements under this option would be voluntary and it would be each council's choice whether or not to sign up to the service. It is unlikely to affect the shared service to the same degree if one council was to opt out of the SLA, although any council doing so might find it difficult to deliver their statutory responsibilities.

There is unlikely to be any legislative implications in this option as SLA's will form the basis for delivery.

## **6. Conclusion**

The shared service sub-group is invited to discuss the above paper.