

III Project Objectives and Constraints

Project Objectives

3.1 The overarching aim of this project is:

“To take this once in a lifetime opportunity, to design a world class local government sector.”

3.2 Against this overarching aim, there are a number of key strategic drivers that were considered in the definition of the objectives for this project. These strategic drivers include:

1. Guiding Principles of RPA

The reforms announced by the RPA were based on four guiding principles:

- Subsidiarity – delivering services and exercising power as close to the people as possible;
- Equality and good relations – equality, social need, good relations, human rights and rural considerations as a basis for “A Shared Future”;
- Coterminality – to create new opportunities for joint planning and working; and
- Strong local government – councils at the heart of the local community, providing civic leadership, ensuring the provision of local services and collaborating with local interests to develop their areas, addressing social, economic and environmental issues that will ensure vibrant, sustainable communities for future generations. Councils will have responsibility for a wide range of functions and strong powers to influence many more.

2. A Focus on People and Places

The core functions of local government are to:

- Deliver services to people and places; and
- Lead the development of communities around their people and their places.

The new responsibilities of community planning including place shaping and the power of well-being should be at the very heart of the design of the new councils rather than simply add-ons to current structures. Community planning is the mechanism which will enable local government to take the lead in building strong, healthy and prosperous communities within its area and is at the very core of the ‘added value’ from councils that this change programme is focused on.

3. A Focus on Value for Money

Local government in Northern Ireland must be structured in a manner that:

- Complies with Public Sector best practice including Gershon, Varney and the recently launched Operational Efficiency Programme; and
- Provides value for money for both ratepayers and taxpayers in Northern Ireland in respect of the level and quality of services they receive.

This latter point is crucial – local government often focuses on the aspiration of the RPA reform having ‘no added cost to the ratepayer’ but there is a much broader view to be taken. Considerations arising from this change programme must apply equitably to both ratepayers and taxpayers.

- 3.3 The project objectives arising from these strategic drivers are set out below. Against each of the objectives, we have set out an initial set of performance targets. Many of these target areas will require further consideration during the initial stages of the reform programme to determine suitable baselines against which future evaluation activities can be conducted.

a) To develop a strong local government

The development of an enhanced local government sector with 11 strong councils was envisaged by the RPA programme as one of the key elements of a modern and optimum public sector in Northern Ireland. Strong local government will be characterised through the:

- Delivery of quality services;
- Effective and efficient operations;
- Collaboration with others to provide holistic solutions; and
- Support for local democracy.

Key performance targets associated with this objective include:

- i. Establishment of 11 new councils by May 2011;
- ii. Completion of RPA reform of local government by May 2015 (or May 2012 if option 2 is selected – see below);
- iii. Service delivery performance in line with national ‘best practice’ benchmarks across all service areas by May 2015;
- iv. Cost of service delivery in line with national ‘best practice’ benchmarks across all service areas by May 2015;
- v. Increased cross-sectoral working by local government organisations by May 2015;

b) To add value to citizens

Local Government exists to add value to citizens through the delivery of services and the shaping of places. This change programme must ensure that the sector becomes absolutely relevant to the people and communities within Northern Ireland through the added value it creates.

Key performance targets associated with this objective include:

- i. Increased citizen awareness of role and responsibilities of local government (following May 2011); and
- ii. Increased citizen confidence in local government to deliver services effectively and efficiently (by May 2011 and May 2015);
- iii. Increased in voter turnout in next local government election (following May 2011); and
- iv. Increased participation in local democracy (measured through greater attendance at / response to local government consultations).

c) To attract, develop and retain high-quality and dedicated staff

Local government must become a sector that people want to work in, a sector that people enjoy working in, a sector that attracts and retains high performers.

Key performance targets associated with this objective include:

- i. Increased staff satisfaction with job, role and organisation by May 2015; and
- ii. Decreased staff turnover rates by May 2015.

d) To provide service excellence to customers/citizens

Local government must focus on the delivery of enhanced services to customers. Services must be designed around the needs and preferences of customers and should be delivered in a manner that exceeds expectations. Services must be both responsive and flexible to meet evolving demands.

Key performance targets associated with this objective include:

- i. Increased citizen satisfaction with quality of those services delivered by local government by May 2015; and
- ii. Increased citizen perception that local government represents value for money by May 2015.

e) To provide value for money

Local government must provide value for money to both ratepayers and taxpayers in line with recognised best practice and relevant benchmarks.

Key performance targets associated with this objective include:

- i. Minimum rate increases as a result of RPA reform – there will be a need to establish a baseline ‘minimum’ for each new council when the funding arrangements for the preferred option are finalised;
- ii. Cost of local government delivery in line with national ‘best practice’ benchmarks by May 2015; and
- iii. Decreased cost of overall public service delivery to local communities by May 2015.

3.4 One of the first tasks in the reform programme will be to establish appropriate benchmarks for these targets.

Project Constraints

3.5 The following constraints have been identified in respect of the proposed project.

a) Legislative Timetable

The transition from 26 Councils to 11 Councils must be undertaken by May 2011. There is a legislative timetable in place which must be adhered to. There is also a local government election to the new council structures scheduled for May 2011. It is worth noting that a general election is likely in 2010 and that there may be an element of political and legislative disruption to the reform process over this time.

b) Capacity for Change

Local government currently has limited capacity and capability to enable and support change (at both member and officer level) and the RPA transition and transformation agenda provides perhaps one of the most challenging change programmes ever faced by the sector. In those central government departments impacted by this reform process the capacity and capability to affect the necessary changes provide a constraint on this programme.

c) Continuity of Service

It is important that service delivery to the general public is uninterrupted throughout the period of this programme. There is an imperative for local government services to be maintained particularly over the period when new councils are introduced.

d) Minimum financial impact on Ratepayer

One of the key aspirations for this project is to be “cost neutral to the ratepayer”. Whether or not this ambition is achievable will depend on a number of factors including availability of funding from central government, scale of transformation and fiscal policies of new councils. In this regard, any savings which may be achieved can be retained by councils either to increase levels of service or reduce District Rates.

The assessment of the various funding options in support of this programme are considered in Section IX.

- 3.6 It is noted that this proposed programme of work also provides challenges for political leadership in Northern Ireland. These challenges are not noted as a formal project constraint as our initial discussions with political parties confirmed both their ambition for quality and value (on behalf of the citizen) and their willingness to consider new and innovative methods for service delivery.
- 3.7 The Northern Ireland Branch of SOLACE commissioned an independent review of the Phase 1 report that is a precursor to this Economic Appraisal. That independent report noted that the proposed Design Approach to the restructuring was the optimum way forward and highlighted the need for political support for this process in terms of resources and leadership.

“The PWC report is of some significance. This is the first reorganisation of local government in Northern Ireland for almost forty years. No-one should underestimate the amount of work required to implement a local government reform and to ensure continuity of service delivery to the public. However, if local government in Northern Ireland is prepared to commit to the type of operating model set out in the PWC report, it has the opportunity to create a modern system of local government that is clearly focused on, and designed to deliver, service improvement and the efficiencies that will be needed over the coming years. That would be unique for a system of local government in the UK. To do so needs the leadership, capacity and resources to work towards that system over the next 24 months.”

Source: Independent Critique (commissioned by SOLACE) of Phase 1 Report