

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM – KEEPING YOU INFORMED

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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the “Keeping You Informed” Newsletter. The Newsletter will bring you up to date with developments on the reform and modernisation of local government in Northern Ireland.

There have been many publications circulated to staff affected by the Review of Public Administration (RPA) aimed at keeping individuals up to date with developments across the range of areas affected by the RPA announcement i.e. health, education, local government etc. This Newsletter will give you a comprehensive update, focusing solely on the proposed changes to the local government sector. It will also update you on progress made to date and advise you of future plans for delivering the changes following the restoration of a devolved Assembly.

With the restoration of the Assembly, the Executive agreed that there would be a review of the Local Government aspects of the Review of Public Administration led by Arlene Foster the DOE Minister who has responsibility for Local Government. Proposals for the Review of the structural and functional decisions of the previous administration in relation to local government were presented to the Executive for consideration at a meeting held on 5 July 2007. At the same time it was agreed that the important work of modernising local government should not lose momentum and should build on the good work of the Local Government Taskforce.



Arlene Foster  
DOE Minister

Following the meeting, the Minister said: **“I am committed to working in partnership with a range of stakeholders to win consensus on the future shape of local government in Northern Ireland. I am determined that there be significant engagement throughout the review, so that we can deliver the change which will achieve the strong, effective and efficient local government that we all want. I have**

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The Minister wishes to pass on her thanks to you all for your ongoing dedication and commitment to providing services to citizens in the midst of this difficult time of change.

written today in agreement with the Executive Committee, to all the Members of the Assembly, the Environment Committee and a range of key stakeholders, setting out the Terms of Reference of the review. The first strand will focus on developing our shared vision for local government. The second will focus on the numbers of councils and the third will concentrate on the functions to transfer to local government. The review will consider the decisions of the previous administration to develop a council-led community planning process and the complementary power of well-being.”

Parallel to this review, DOE and the Strategic Leadership Board will continue to work to modernise local government. Chaired by the Minister this group includes the political parties and NILGA together with the Department.

In this Newsletter you will find information on what has happened to date, what has been agreed by the devolved Assembly and how work will progress.

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### Key Players in Delivering the RPA in Local Government

#### MINISTER FOR DOE

Responsible for Local Government as a sector



Arlene Foster MLA  
Minister for the Environment



#### NILGA

The representative voice of Local Government in Northern Ireland.



Councillor Sean McPeake  
President - NILGA



## LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM – KEEPING YOU INFORMED

### Latest Developments

Since the restoration of the devolved Assembly, it has been agreed that the Executive will review progress in implementing RPA and, in doing so, will consider the strategic direction of the implementation programme. In this context, the Executive considered the decisions of the previous administration and the following has been agreed:

- that the Minister of the Environment would bring proposals to the Executive for a process to consider the number of councils and functions which would be required in the context of Devolved Government and wider decisions on the RPA Implementation Programme; and
- that a modernisation programme, building on the work of the Local Government Taskforce, should proceed.

### Review

In relation to the review of the number of councils and the functions to transfer to Local Government, the Minister of the Environment proposed that the review should be limited in two important respects. Firstly, the review of the number of councils should be limited to those options on which the RPA canvassed views in the March 2005 consultation paper i.e. 7, 11 or 15. Secondly, in terms of the range of functions for transfer to local government, it should focus initially on those functions which the previous administration announced in March 2006 should transfer to local government. If, however, in the

course of the review, the Executive wish to bring other functions to the table to be considered for transfer, these will be considered.

The issues to be considered by the review cut right across government and it is important that the Executive considers them collectively. Oversight of the review will be the remit of a sub committee of the Executive with provision for reporting progress and emerging findings to the Executive. Composition of that sub committee is:-

**Chair:** Minister of the Environment

**Members:** Minister for Finance and Personnel, Minister for Social Development, Minister for Regional Development, Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Not only is the sub committee designed to deliver the involvement of the four parties represented on the Executive, but it also involves those Ministers with the most significant interest in the RPA decisions being reviewed.

It has been agreed that the review should report to the Executive by the autumn. July and August will be spent in desk research, analysis and bilateral discussions with Ministers and others, with a view to bringing an emerging findings paper to the Executive in September. September and October will be spent in intensive engagement with key stakeholders, including the Environment Committee, to refine the findings. The starting point for this review will be the consultation which the RPA team engaged in as part of the earlier process. The sub-committee will draw heavily on the outcome of that consultation in

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developing its thinking. That would pave the way for the sub-committee to present its final report to the Executive in November, with a view to the Executive announcing its decisions to the Assembly, staff affected by the Review and the public in December 2007.

The proposed review covers three main elements. The first strand focuses on developing our **Vision for Local Government** – what we expect local government to deliver in the context of a fully-functioning devolved Assembly and Executive and the agreed strategic direction of RPA reform. The second will focus on the **number of Councils**. The third will concentrate on the functions to **Transfer to Local Government**. All three elements interlink and in addition, the review will need to consider as cross-cutting issues the decisions of the previous administration to develop a council-led community planning process and the complementary power of well-being.

It has been agreed that work on modernising local government should be driven forward in parallel with the work to review the RPA structural and functional decisions.

### **Local Government Modernisation**

The modernisation work programme will be taken forward in two work strands;

- strengthening the way in which councils work by modernising the policy and legislative framework within which councils operate and by addressing the capacity of

members to deliver accountable citizen-centred local government services.

- improving the way in which local councils work in terms of delivering services in a way that is standardised, simple and provides value for money, thus enabling resources to be released by councils to improve front line service delivery. Each strand will be taken forward under the auspices of a sub-group of the Strategic Leadership Board.

On both strands, detailed work to address options, costs, benefits and timescales for delivery needs to be taken forward as a first step. It is envisaged that this work will take approximately 6 months to complete and may require some external consultancy support. The initial piece of work will provide the detail necessary to support any future bids the Department wishes to make to DFP for funding to support local government modernisation. We envisage the creation of a Challenge Fund, administered by DOE, from which monies can be made available to local councils to undertake service improvement schemes and maximise the development of co-operative and collaborative ventures across groups of councils. DOE has made a bid for appropriate funding.

Alongside this work, the Department will also be working with local government as a sector, and with individual councils and groups of councils, to optimise service improvement opportunities already being considered by the sector. The work on developing a detailed

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modernisation programme will require the direct involvement of local government as a sector and the individual councils if we are to develop options, costs and benefits that are based on sound information and reflect the needs of the sector. This will be achieved through the establishment of two sub-groups of the Strategic Leadership Board (SLB).

### **Sub-Groups of Strategic Leadership Board**

Each sub-group of the SLB will be chaired by a member of the Strategic Leadership Board with membership made up of a small number of elected members, senior council officers, officials and others as necessary. The sub-groups would then work closely with ad hoc task and finish groups or existing working groups (such as the NILGA e-Government Working Group) to develop proposals for a prioritised, costed and timetabled programme of work. Each programme would then be put to the Strategic Leadership Board and, ultimately the Minister of the Environment for ratification. Our aim is to develop detailed proposals, terms of reference and standing orders for the two sub-groups in July and August, with a view to agreeing the way forward at a meeting of the Strategic Leadership Board in August.

### **Background: RPA and Local Government Modernisation**

#### **RPA ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Review of Public Administration (RPA) was set up by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2002 to deliver wide-ranging and

comprehensive modernisation and reform to the public sector. The full range of decisions of RPA was included in 'Better Government for Northern Ireland' which was published in March 2006. The decisions in relation to local government can be summarised as:

- The creation of seven councils;
- The transfer of a significant range of functions to the new councils, from central government and other bodies; and
- The development of a new council-led community planning process and the power of well-being.

### **The Local Government Taskforce**

The Local Government Taskforce, led by the former Minister responsible for the Department of the Environment, and involving representatives of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and the five main political parties, has been leading the implementation of the RPA decisions and leading a parallel and integrated process of modernisation within local government, with nine issue based sub-groups considering issues relating to governance, finance, estates, shared services, the relationship between central and local government, performance management, capacity building, community planning and human resources.

### **Local Government Taskforce - Summary of Sub-Groups Findings**

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A Summary of the main outcomes of each of the nine Sub-Groups of the Local Government Reform Taskforce follows. Anyone wishing to view any of the Sub-Group Reports in more detail can access them on the DOE website at:  
[www.doeni.gov.uk/index/local\\_government\\_reform.htm](http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/local_government_reform.htm)

### *Human Resources*

The Report from the HR Sub-Group identified a number of key themes and recommendations in relation to:

- Managing staffing within the current and transitional environment to ensure continued service delivery;
- Ensuring the new staffing structures necessary to deliver the new local government arrangements to include the filling of new posts and the transfer of staff to the new structures from 2009;
- Arrangements for displaced staff; and
- The optimum arrangements for the provision of HR services within the new local government structures.

### *Capacity Building*

The Capacity Building Group recognised the need to build the capacity of both the people and the organisations to help ensure that local government is well equipped to maintain services during the period of transition; to manage the transition to the new councils; and to develop and implement the new structures whilst continuing to deliver high quality customer focused services. The Group recognised the need to identify

and address the needs of elected members, officers, people transferring into local government, and other stakeholders to enable them to develop the skills and competencies necessary for the challenges ahead.

In recommending the way forward the Capacity Building Sub-Group identified the need for structures and funding to support a programme of capacity building and recommended a range of development opportunities for the people and organisations involved.

### *Central/Local Relations Sub-Group*

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.

The Sub-Group's headline recommendation was to create a statutory Partnership Panel between central and local government.

### *Performance Management*

The report from the Performance Management Sub-Group recommended:

- The development of a new statutory duty to secure best value and continuous improvement, with associated recommendations in

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relation to audit and enforcement by Ministers through their Departments;

- A statutory requirement to publish performance indicators in respect of a number of agreed priorities including a requirement for councils to publish a corporate plan setting out medium objectives together with relevant targets and indicators;
- An Improvement Service run by local government for local government which should include elements of self assessment and periodic peer review.

### *Shared Services*

The Shared Services Sub-Group considered:

- Existing services within local government that are delivered on a shared/group basis, such as building control and environmental health and suggested possible options for the future delivery ensuring best value services for the citizen;
- A number of key services transferring to local government, such as planning and roads, and, in relation to those services, whether they might be delivered on a regional or shared basis, in whole or in part;
- How a shared service agenda for the future might be developed, in relation to the period between now and new councils coming into existence.

It was generally accepted by the sub-group that there still remains much work to be done in managing the change, but if the right principles are

adopted at the outset in relation to the choice, governance and delivery of shared services, and important consequential decisions weighed carefully, then a move towards shared services may be worth the effort.

### *Finance*

The Finance Sub-Group considered and reported on a range of issues that will impact on current and future financing arrangements for local government, including transitional issues and those following the transfer of functions.

The Group concluded that there were a number of areas that would require further work and research in order to determine financial and legislative implications for local government re-organisation.

### *Estates Sub-Group*

Whilst the RPA does not deal specifically with issues concerning the estate of Council areas, its implementation will facilitate improved management of the estate as a significant element of the change management process. The RPA and the reform of Quangos and Executive Agencies will have two major outcomes: a reduction in the number of councils; and the transfer of responsibilities such as planning, housing, local roads and urban regeneration from central to local government. On a practical level both Central and Local Government are keen to modernise and maximise on the opportunities arising from such change. Consequently, the sub-group examined current practice and associated information systems with a

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view to modernising service delivery in line with best practice elsewhere and bearing in mind the recognised potential for further efficiency savings in the provision of accommodation.

The Sub-Group developed a roadmap which details a range of activities which should be taken forward particularly during the transitional phase and the first two years of the new councils.

### *Community Planning*

The Community Planning Sub-Group of the Local Government Taskforce was charged with bringing forward proposals to affect the devolution of the duty of “Community Planning”, along with an enabling power of “Well-being”, to Councils in Northern Ireland.

The report presented twenty one recommendations covering areas such as legislation, statutory guidance, pilot projects and capacity building.

The Sub-Group proposed that under the legislation, local councils should be required to initiate and maintain a Community Planning process, leading to the production of a Community Plan. In turn, all other public bodies should have a statutory duty to participate in, and assist in the delivery of, Community Planning. Community Plans should provide a framework for making public services responsive to, and organised around, the needs of local communities.

The sub-group also recommended the establishment of a number of community planning pilots. These will inform both the development of good practice and the statutory guidance

that will be issued to local government in respect of the community planning process.

### *Governance*

In his statement of 22 November 2005, the Secretary of State said “good governance is not only about checks and balances; it is about focusing on the outcomes for citizens, it is about performing effectively, it is about making informed and transparent decisions, and it is about promoting a strong values culture and determining these values through behaviour. It is fundamentally about engendering trust”.

The aim of the Governance Sub-Group was to examine each of the specific areas that make up the confines of local governance and determine a model for the new local government structures, define clear standards, roles and responsibilities for both members and officers. Its remit also included making a series of recommendations to ensure an equal system is in place to facilitate decision making between political parties as well as a system of checks and balances to deliver fair, effective and publicly accountable decisions with an appropriate role developed for the citizen to participate in the democratic process through informing, scrutinising and challenging decisions. The Sub-Group submitted a series of high level governance principles.

### *Taskforce Review*

As attention moved on from the initial policy development phase and began to focus more on implementation it was recognised, by all stakeholders, that a review of the Taskforce

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structure and delivery mechanisms  
was required to ensure that they were  
“fit for the purpose” to drive and deliver

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the modernisation and reform programme. Consequently, the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) of the English Local Government Association, which has extensive knowledge of change management within local government in England, was commissioned to take forward the review. A copy of the report is available at [www.doeni.gov.uk/index/local\\_government\\_reform.htm](http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/local_government_reform.htm)

In light of the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA) review it was agreed that a revised Taskforce structure comprising a top level Strategic Leadership Board supported by five politically-led Policy Development Panels, together with a Social Partners Forum should be established to take forward implementation.

### *Strategic Leadership Board*

The first meeting of the Strategic Leadership Board was held on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2007 with a further meeting held in February 2007. The main discussions at the meetings focused on agreeing the way forward and deliberations regarding the draft terms of reference for the Strategic Leadership Board and the five Policy Development Panels. The most recent meeting was held on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2007, where the Minister's proposals for a review of the RPA local government decisions and the development of a modernisation programme were discussed.

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