

20 January 2010

Poots visits new council area representatives

Environment Minister Edwin Poots paid tribute to the crucial preparatory work being carried out by the Mid and East Antrim Transition Committee at its meeting on 19 January.

During his visit the Minister commended the Committee as it prepares for the amalgamation of Ballymena, Carrickfergus and Larne Councils in May 2011.

Transition Committees have been set up in each of the 11 new council areas. Their role is to undertake much of the preparatory work to facilitate the convergence of amalgamating councils. This will pave the way for Statutory Transition Committees, which will be established early in 2010, to take key decisions in advance of the new councils coming into effect in May 2011 and ensure a smooth transition.

Mr Poots said: **“The Local Government Reform Programme is now moving into the critical implementation phase so I felt that it was important to personally meet each of the Transition Committees.**

“The Mid and East Antrim Transition Committee will be central to delivering this transition to a new council in May 2011. I do not for one minute underestimate the workload involved in amalgamating these three councils but I am confident that in continuing to work together, we can and will successfully change the face of local government for the better.

“I am pleased from my visit today to see the progress already made by the Committee in this ambitious programme and I encourage it to ensure that the momentum it has built up is maintained.”

Chair of the Mid and East Antrim Transition Committee, Alderman Billy Ashe, welcomed the Minister and thanked him for taking time to visit the Committee.

Alderman Ashe said: "The Minister's visit is a welcome endorsement of our plans to create the new Ballymena, Carrickfergus and Larne Council in May 2011. Our three merging councils are working well together, having already agreed a vision for the future and established inter Council working groups where officers are working vigorously to merge policies and procedures.

"Whilst we recognise that there is still much to do we are confident that what is achieved during the next two years will set the direction of local government for a generation. We are committed to making the transition process work for the benefit of citizens and staff alike and we are keen to build on the success of all three councils.

"On behalf of our Transition Committee I thank the Minister for his visit which has been both helpful and productive and I am sure other Transition Committees will find this personal approach key to taking forward reform."

The Minister completed his visit by stating that he remained committed to doing everything possible to deliver on the local government reform timetable. He said: **"I firmly believe that this offers us an opportunity to transform services so that we are more proactive, co-ordinated and responsive to the needs of our citizens. I appreciate there are concerns at the moment but my position remains that it is right to deliver improved public services as close to the people as possible, with councils fulfilling the leading role at the heart of the local community. I continue to do everything within my power to progress this."**

Notes to editors:

1. The Local Government Reform Programme will see the existing 26 councils reduced to 11 in May 2011. It will involve the transfer of a range of central government functions to local government including responsibility for planning, regeneration and certain road functions.
2. This was the ninth in a series of visits to each of the Transition Committees throughout Northern Ireland.
3. Following guidance issued by the Department of the Environment, all 11 new council areas have now established Transition Committees.
4. The membership of the Mid and East Antrim Transition Committee comprises councillors from Ballymena, Carrickfergus and Larne Borough councils.
5. All media enquiries should be directed to the DOE Press Office on 028 9054 0003. Out of office hours please contact the duty press officer via pager number 07699 715 440 and your call will be returned.