

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 16 JUNE 2009 AT 10.00 AM IN
CRAIGAVON CIVIC CENTRE

In Attendance:-

Joint Chair

John Price	Department of Environment (DOE) Local Government Policy Division
Heather Moorhead	Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)

Local Government Reform Communications Group Members

Claire Bethel	Lisburn CC and Castlereagh BC
Alan Burke	Cookstown DC, Dungannon & South Tyrone BC and Magherafelt DC
Eileen Cowan	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL)
Tara Cunningham	Ballymoney BC, Coleraine BC, Limavady BC and Moyle DC
Eamon Deeny	Belfast CC
Liam Flanagan	Limavady BC and SOLACE
Ross Gillanders	Lisburn CC and Castlereagh BC
Michaela Glass	Department of Regional Development (DRD) – Roads Service
Bumper Graham	NIC/ICTU
Elizabeth Harkin	Omagh DC and Fermanagh DC
James Hutchinson	Department of Environment (DOE) – Planning Service
Claire Jackson	Ards BC and North Down BC
Claire Lundy	Derry CC and Strabane DC
Pauline Nixon-Black	Armagh City and District Council, Banbridge DC and Craigavon BC
Sharon O'Connor	Down DC, Newry & Mourne DC
Lisa O'Neill	Local Government Staff Commission (LGSC)
Carol Reid	Department of Social Development (DSD)
Philip Thompson	Ballymena BC, Carrickfergus BC and Larne BC
Tracey White	Newtownabbey BC and Antrim BC

Joint Secretariat

Louise Thompson	DOE – Local Government Policy Division
Jacqueline Burns	DOE – Local Government Policy Division
Mark Maher	NILGA

Apologies

Roberta Dalton	Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)
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Drew Haire
Jim Murray
Grace Nesbitt
Philip Rodgers

OFMDFM
Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE)
Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP)
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
(DETI)

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

John Price, on behalf of the Joint Secretariat, welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the Local Government Reform Communications Group.

John Price introduced Heather Moorhead as the Joint Chair and explained the role of the Joint Secretariat and explained the three different strands of communication – DOE, NILGA and joint DOE and NILGA.

John Price introduced the communication teams at both DOE and NILGA and each member of the Communications Group briefly introduced themselves.

Action point: contact details of all Communications Group members to be circulated. (Joint Secretariat)

2. MATTERS DISCUSSED

2.1 Communications Group

2.1.1 John Price highlighted that the previous Communications Forum was less than successful and to ensure that this new Group worked, it would be essential that the correct representatives from each of the Council clusters attended. John Price asked that attendees used this first meeting to ascertain if they were the right people to be on the Communications Group. It was stressed that representatives selected from each Council cluster need to be communications professionals.

2.1.2 John Price clarified that the Communications Group will contain representation from local government, unions, and central government departments with functions transferring and other organisations.

2.1.3 John Price further explained that the Communications Group is designed to be responsive to the Group's members needs - using the opportunity to

- 2.1.4 Delivery of the message and ensuring that it is appropriate for the audience is up to Communications Group representatives.
- 2.2 Where Are We Now?
- 2.2.1 JP and HM delivered an update on the Local Government Reform Programme. John Price focussed on Executive decisions and HM on implementation structures.
- 2.2.2 A Question and Answer session followed which identified some of the key issues:
- Funding and resources – who is lobbying for funding? It was confirmed that there are ongoing meetings about funding. NILGA said that they call for resources at every ministerial meeting and it was also relayed that Transition Committees also need to lobby for funding and resources.
 - Corporate identity and branding was raised as an important emerging resource issue.
 - Will there be a body to represent the 11 councils? Heather Moorehead confirmed that there would be no one body but that they would need to look at a next step for NILGA. John Price commented that one body would be premature at the moment as not all councils are communicating effectively with each other.
 - The importance of PSC Guiding Principle 1 – the need to engage with Trade Unions before communication issues to staff was reiterated.
 - It was agreed that a partnership between communications, Human Resources personnel and the Trade Unions was essential.
 - Concerns were expressed that staff are being called on to do more but the “day job” still needs to be covered. John Price highlighted that there is ongoing work at Policy Development Panel (PDP) and Strategic Leadership Board (SLB) on staffing implications.
 - Group members also commented that communications needs to be seen as a priority and the essential role in the change process should be recognised. It was suggested that communications structures should be established early on in the process and that appointments should be given

2.2.3 John Price advised that he has visited a number of councils to present this update on the Local Government Reform Programme and confirmed that both DOE and NILGA are available to do this if it would be considered helpful to councils.

2.2.4 Heather Moorehead pointed out that going forward communications need to be delivered to clusters with an appropriate plan developed for each. She further stated that communications need to be quality assured, effective and measured; and that they need to be tailored to meet the needs of people on the ground.

2.2.5 John Price informed the Group that they would be included in all communication updates issued after SLB and RTCG and encouraged the Group members to provide feedback on all communications issued.

2.3 Purpose of the Communications Group

2.3.1 Attendees discussed issues around the expectations and future direction of the Local Government Reform Communications Group. The attendees responded to a number of questions posed:

Q1. What do you see as the purpose of the Communications Group?

- Look at models of best practice
- Act as the link between the Group and the attendee's respective cluster/department/organisation
- Identify communication issues that require lobbying and ensure a two-way flow of communication
- Ensure local and central strategies are developed and aligned together
- Develop consistent, clear, understandable messages
- Act as an early warning system to identify if things are not working well

Q2. What do you see as your role on the Communications Group?

- Provide each cluster/department with a voice

- Share information and best practice
- Provide feedback to and from council cluster groups, departments and respective organisations
- Implement best practice discussed in the Group

Q3. What do you see as the role of the Joint Secretariat?

- Provide a central pool of information such as tool kits that can be easily accessed either on a website or through an identified contact person
- Provide top line information and sign posting to the Group on key dates, issues and contacts
- Ensure that information is appropriately disseminated to communications personnel in a timely manner
- Facilitate a two-way communications flow between the SLB, RTCG and the Communications Group

2.5 Communication Priorities

2.5.1 Attendees also discussed what they saw as the immediate communication priorities and from this identified the most beneficial agenda items for future meetings of the Communications Group. Communication priorities identified as:

- Development of a communication strategy template from the Group's expertise that can be used by local government representatives as a guide when drawing up the communications strategy for their respective Transition Committee.
- Messaging workshop – development of simple, easy to understand messages which can be used consistently across the sector to promote the change process.
- Best practice workshops and information sharing such as internal communications through the change process.
- Communication structures and relationships – ensuring that communications are linked to programme management.
- Corporate identity and branding including procurement - achieving efficiencies across the council clusters when creating communication

- Preparation for the communications impact on local government with the transfer of functions from central government, for example, the advertising and press work created by certain functions such as the transfer of Planning Service; the need for council websites to be developed cost effectively to provide online services to the citizen such as tracking planning applications online.
- Clarity on resources. It was reiterated that it needs to be established as soon as possible what resources are available for local government communications.

2.6 Future Meetings

2.6.1 The Group discussed the format of future meetings. From a best practice perspective it was agreed to invite Eileen Beamish to a future meeting to share her learning's from the health transfer.

ACTION: John Price to approach Eileen Beamish

2.6.2 Everyone agreed that corporate identity, branding and advertising of the new councils would need to be considered. Also the development of websites to include elements such as planning application and tracking functions.

2.6.3 It was of a general opinion that communication structures and relationships are linked to programme management.

2.6.4 It was envisaged that the next meeting should be held during July/August. Both Tara Cunningham and Pauline Nixon-Black confirmed that they had started to develop a Communications Strategy. It was agreed that they would work together on a draft Communications Strategy template which would include how local councils should engage with staff transferring from central government. The draft strategy will be presented at the next meeting for feedback from everyone with a view to it being a template for councils to adapt for their area.

2.6.5 Transferring function departments felt that it was too early to attend Communications Group meetings. It was agreed that it would be useful to

3. Location and Frequency of Meetings

3.1 It was generally agreed that a central location for meetings was best such as Craigavon.

3.2 It was felt that meetings should be held when required rather than at set intervals.

Action point	Assigned to	Due by
(1) Circulation of contact details	Louise Thompson	Circulated by next meeting
(2.6.1) Approach to Eileen Beamish to speak at a future meeting	John Price	Contacted by next meeting
(2.6.4) Draft communications strategy template to share for input and feedback with the Communications Group	Pauline Nixon-Black & Tara Cunningham	Draft to be circulated prior to next meeting