

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP BOARD MEETING – 15 AUGUST 2007

REVIEW OF RPA DECISIONS – STATUS REPORT

AGENDA ITEM: 3

SUMMARY: Providing members with an update on progress with in the review of the RPA decision of the previous administration as they relate to local government.

ACTION REQUIRED: For information.

Background

1. At the 5 July 2007 Executive Committee meeting, detailed proposals for the agreed review of local government aspects of RPA along with Terms of Reference (copy attached at Annex A), governance arrangements, the timeline and key milestones were agreed. They also agreed that the starting point for the review would be the second consultation which the RPA team engaged in, in March 2005, as part of the earlier process.
2. The review is being taken forward in three strands. The first strand will develop a shared vision for local government. The second will consider the number of councils and the third will focus on the functions to transfer to local government. The review will also consider the decisions of the previous administration to develop a council-led community planning process and the complementary power of well-being.
3. Work is already underway on all three strands and Local Government Reform Division officials are actively engaging with key stakeholders and interested parties following the issue of letters from the Minister and a news release on 6 July 2007 announcing the review.

Strand One – Developing a Shared Vision

4. Desk research to review and establish the characteristics of local government in Northern Ireland in the context of a fully-functioning devolved Assembly and Executive taking account of the RPA consultation and research, and models elsewhere including the Republic of Ireland, England and Wales was completed at the end of July 2007.
5. Stakeholder interviews have now commenced and as part of the stakeholder engagement, two events will take place in the autumn. Further detail on the development of the vision is provided in paper SLB 16/2007.

Strand Two – The Number of Councils

6. Work to date on this strand has involved reviewing the RPA decisions as a means of gaining an understanding of the factors and rationale which informed the development of a seven council model. Discussions have also been held with researchers from QUB and UU to understand the various facets of their research and the statistical modelling undertaken on the three models with a view to updating the data and then testing them against these factors to determine the optimum model for future local government in the new political context. The research will carry on for most of the summer and into early September 2007.

Strand Three – Functions to Transfer to Local Government

7. The third strand of the review is revisiting RPA decisions in relation to the transfer of functions to local government from Departments and public bodies. While the review is limited to consideration of the RPA decisions announced in November 2005 and March 2006, it will enable Departments to revisit options considered in the March 2005 consultation paper. The impact of Department proposals on a council led community planning process and the complementary power of well being will also be assessed, as will the financial and efficiency considerations of revised proposals.

8. An initial request for Department's proposals was made through an inter-Departmental Transfer of Functions Forum on 11 July 2007. This group, which has representatives from each of the 11 Departments, was set up to consider and develop NICS views on cross cutting local government reform issues. The request was followed up by a formal request from the DOE Permanent Secretary to all members of the Permanent Secretaries Group (PSG).
9. Departments have been asked to provide details of their proposed transfer of functions under devolved administration, their proposed timetable for transfer, an estimate of the costs and staff numbers involved and an explanation for any variation to the original RPA decisions, to inform the discussions at the Executive Sub-Committee meetings. It is unlikely that the full impact of any variation to RPA decisions will be known until the end of August.

General

10. Meetings have taken place with the Equality Commission to update them on the review as there is a need to ensure all equality obligations are met in undertaking the review particularly in the absence of any public consultation.
11. An initial meeting of the Executive Sub-Committee tasked with overseeing the review is scheduled for 13 August 2007 to provide a progress report and agree the next stages of the review work programme with a view to bringing an emerging findings paper to the Executive Committee meeting in September.

ANNEX A

REVIEW OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASPECTS OF THE REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The review of local government aspects of the Review of Public Administration will consider what local government is expected to deliver in the context of a fully-functioning devolved Assembly and Executive, and in the context of the strategic direction of the Review of Public Administration, will consider the number of councils and functions that the Executive believes would be required.

In considering the number of councils, the review will consider the three options on which views were sought in the March 2005 Further Consultation on the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland.

In considering the functions that the Executive believe should be delivered by local government, the review will consider the decisions on local government functions set out in the previous administration's Final Announcements on the Review of Public Administration of 22 November 2005 and 21 March 2006, and will take account of financial and efficiency considerations. The review may also consider options on which views were sought in the March 2005 Further Consultation on the Review of Public Administration that Ministerial colleagues may wish to be considered.

The review will be led by a sub-committee of the Executive Committee chaired by the Minister of the Environment, and will report to the Executive by autumn 2007.