

## NI civil servants go AWOL

### SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

**MINISTER** David Hanson is pleased with the progress made on *Positive Steps* since its publication in March 2005. In the parallel universe of the voluntary and community sector, the report has had very little effect and seems to be a diminishing asset.

Our in-depth report on pages 10-13 sets out the two very different perspectives and gives the views of three long-standing representatives of the voluntary and community sector who are actively involved in developing and monitoring relations between the sector and government.

One dimension of the issue has been referred to only in passing – the obvious lack of enthusiasm in several government departments for active engagement with voluntary and community organisations.

Let's go back to the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector and the government's response in the form of the *Positive Steps* report. These were supposed to build on the compact between government and the sector in 1998 and mark a strengthened relationship between the two. *Positive Steps* promised high-level involvement in the Joint Forum by all departments.

Much work is supposed to be done at local level between individual departments and organisations but the structure to discuss strategic and policy matters at the top level was the Joint Forum, co-chaired by the Social Development Minister to emphasise its importance.

Yet, only five government departments turned up for the last meeting. DSD, the lead department, had three

representatives present and another four who sent their apologies. Also represented were the Departments of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), Employment and Learning (DEL) and Health, Social Services and Personal Safety (DHSSPS), as well as the Northern Ireland Office.

The Departments of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and Regional Development (DRD) have the worst records; they have failed to arrive for any of the last three meetings and the Department of the Environment (DoE) has missed the last two.

Also absent from the latest meeting were the Departments of Education (DE), Enterprise, Trade and Industry (DETI), Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

The absence of the departments has a very real impact. It meant that some items on the latest agenda could not be considered. DE, for example, was due to speak about the Children and Young People funding package and OFMDFM was supposed to give an update about *A Shared Future* so these items could not be discussed.

More generally it signals that these departments do not regard a meeting of the Joint Forum as important enough for their civil servants to travel to Derry.

This isn't just a bureaucratic thing or injured pride among sector representatives. The Joint Forum discusses vital issues such as the anti-poverty strategy, good relations, children and young people, public spending and the Review of Public Administration.

Not only is it important for departments to discuss such high-level matters with the voluntary and community sector; it is essential that they talk to one another about social policies if we are to move towards the joined-up government we badly need.

It is little wonder then that the survey of NICVA members revealed that few think *Positive Steps* is having significant impact on the sector outside of one or two areas; substantially more (and a greater number than a year ago) believe it is having little or no effect.

Inevitably, following the breakthrough agreement last week to restore devolution, our minds turn to what might have happened if we already had Direct Rule. Would our local Minister insist that their officials take the job of engaging with the voluntary and community sector seriously?

If we do have an Executive on 8 May, as seems likely, we will find out soon enough. A better attendance at Joint Forum meetings will be just one of the many ways in which we will expect Ministers to listen and respond to our concerns.

Meanwhile Minister Hanson is the one in charge and he must be easily pleased if he thinks there has been good progress; he hasn't yet managed to get civil servants to sign up to a government initiative with the support of all Ministers and permanent secretaries.

The new joint heads of OFMDFM, Paisley and McGuinness, may not be so easily impressed.



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