



**Northern Ireland
Review of Public Administration**

22 November 2005

ROOKER HERALDS RETURN TO STRONG LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Planning, local roads functions and regeneration are some of the new powers for District Councils following the shake-up of the public sector announced this morning.

The Minister with responsibility for the Review of Public Administration, Jeff Rooker has been speaking about how the decisions will impact upon the local government sector.

He said: **“Local government must be at the heart of local services, locally delivered to operate at a size and a scale that will allow a council to stretch itself in terms of the services it delivers now and into the future.**

“To do that, requires a population and a geography where the opportunities of raising wealth to deliver services and plan for the future can be optimised.

“It also requires a range of functions to be delivered by councils which taken together will have a significant impact for good on people’s lives and the quality of services they received.”

Referring to the community planning process, which will be one of the new functions, the Minister said:

“The aim of community planning is to make sure that people and communities are genuinely engaged in decisions made about public services which affect them.

“Through the community planning process we have an opportunity to address poverty, promote good relations, target environmental inequalities and tackle the fundamental issues which prevent the achievement of sustainable communities.

“I also want to introduce a new power of well-being for councils to complement community planning.”

Jeff Rooker continued:

“I also want to make clear that all the functions which transfer to Councils will be accompanied by appropriate funding. This will require a new system of local government finance, including some transfers from Regional to District Rates and a new General Grant regime.”

Commenting on the role of the seven new councils, Jeff Rooker said:

“Councils will need to see themselves as commissioners of services. With the seven new Councils coming into being, they will have an ideal opportunity to co-operate.

“It will be in everyone’s interest to decide what Councils need to do for themselves and what they can more effectively do in co-operation with others.

“One of the key functions of councils will be to foster good community relations.

“The development of strong local government in Northern Ireland is a ‘lightening rod’ for a shared future. In future councils will ensure that good relations actions are earthed in the needs of local communities.”

Taking account of the Secretary of State’s reference to the safeguards required for effective decision-making in councils Jeff Rooker said:

“I would want to begin discussions soon with the political parties to get examples of good practice and to agree how best we might take this extremely important issue forward.”

Referring to the dual mandate, the Minister said:

“Currently 69 of our 108 MLAs are also serving councillors.

“All of the main political parties are agreed that with the development of a strong tier of local government, unacceptable conflicts of interest will occur.

“Consequently following the restoration of Devolution, my view is that legislation should be brought forward so that in future it will not be possible to hold the elected office of MLA and councillor at the same time.”

In conclusion the Minister said:

“Why are we doing this? It is not for political gain or for a love of change.

“It is because we recognise as the Executive and Assembly recognised back in June 2002 that we must move forward from the legacy of conflict, we must focus on the future with due respect for a very difficult past and we do it not for ourselves but for the generations to follow so

that our young people will be the ones who reap the greatest reward in a new Northern Ireland proudly taking its place on the world stage.”

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. The additional and enhanced functions which the seven new councils will have responsibility for are:

Planning	Community Planning
Local roads functions	Environmental Health
Conservation of natural and built heritage	Leisure and Recreation (local water recreation facilities)
Local economic development	Arts and Culture (Armagh County Museum)
Local tourism	Community Development
Urban and rural regeneration	Community Relations
Rural development	Emergency Planning
Future European Programmes	Other services carried out in partnership with or on behalf of other bodies
Environmental Services (Spot listing of buildings)	Planning local bus services
Application of Building Regulations	Maintenance of the public realm

2. A Local Government Boundary Commissioner will be appointed as soon as possible. The Boundary Commissioner will be asked to use the following configurations as a starting point for the boundary review:

- Belfast
- In the North East: Coleraine, Moyle, Ballymoney, Ballymena and Larne
- Around Antrim: Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey, Antrim and Lisburn
- In Down: North Down, Newtownards, Castlereagh and Down
- In the South: Craigavon, Armagh, Banbridge, Newry and Mourne
- In the North West: Derry, Limavady, Strabane and Magherafelt
- In the South West: Fermanagh, Omagh, Cookstown and Dungannon and South Tyrone.

3. Background information about the Review of Public Administration can be found on the RPA website www.rpani.gov.uk

4. Media enquiries to Áine Gaughran 9027 7606/07717732079