

NICVA Briefing Paper on the Review of Public Administration Further Consultation

What is the Review of Public Administration?

The Review of Public Administration (RPA) is the first major examination in over 30 years of how public services in Northern Ireland are organised and delivered. The Northern Ireland Executive set up the Review, which began work in 2002. Since then the review team have held one major consultation, commissioned research, examined models in other countries and produced models of new arrangements for almost 150 public sector organisations which between them are responsible for over 80% of expenditure on devolved public services.

The current consultation document is the second and final phase of the process and sets out proposed new arrangements for health services, education, local government and Quangos.

What does the document propose?

The first RPA consultation identified a number of major common themes:

- There was almost unanimous support for the need for change
- Quality of service was seen as the most important characteristic of service delivery
- There was consensus on the need for fewer public bodies
- There was strong support for public bodies to share common geographical boundaries
- There was a preference for fewer, larger councils with more powers.

Responses from the voluntary and community sector emphasised a role for the sector in both delivering and advocating for services, a customer focused agenda and the need for continuity in transitional arrangements. The document stresses the role of the voluntary and community sector at several points, both in service delivery and in helping to shape local services and

articulate local needs, particularly through community planning, as explained below.

A two-tier model

The document proposes a two-tier model of public administration. The regional tier would be made up of the Assembly, Executive and central government departments. The main role of this level would be to “develop and shape policy and legislation, and set strategic objectives for services.”

The second tier would be a sub-regional or local tier consisting of new stronger local councils, new health bodies and the sub-regional delivery units of regional bodies (such as education). Service delivery would mostly take place at this sub-regional level. Local councils would have “a central role in developing and co-ordinating local policy on service delivery between the major service providers within their council boundary.”

Community planning

This co-ordination would be achieved through what is called a Community Planning Process. This model is already being tried in other parts of the UK. According to the document “the council would have a statutory duty to prepare a plan in consultation with other service providers and the community they represent. The other service providers would be required by legislation to co-operate fully in this planning process. The objective would be to develop a co-ordinated response to the identified needs of the population in their area.”

It is envisaged in the document that the voluntary and community sector would play a role in the community planning process. It states: “Community planning would provide an opportunity for the voluntary and community sector to contribute to the development of a strategic plan for the local area and fulfil a role as key partners in the planning, co-ordination and delivery of services.”

The two-tier model recognises the different roles of the voluntary and community sector and envisages that these “will develop in scale and importance at both the local and central levels of government.”

Health and social services

The document proposes two options. Ideally, based on all the research undertaken, there should be five new Health and Personal Social Services (HPSS) agencies. Each one would be self contained and would have at least one acute hospital. The document contains a series of maps which show proposed new boundaries.

However, because of the proposals for the numbers of local councils (see below) the option of seven HPSS agencies is also proposed. This option has the disadvantage that some of the seven would not have the full range of hospital services within their local area, although these could be commissioned from neighbouring agencies. It has the advantage that, if there were seven councils, their borders would match exactly which would facilitate much easier planning and co-ordination.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) will remain responsible for determining regional policy, legislation, allocation of resources, oversight and management. The existing Boards and Trusts will be replaced by the five or seven new agencies which will commission and provide services. These agencies will be overseen by boards made up from council nominees and public appointments, in addition to executive directors. The current four Health and Social Services Councils will be replaced by one regional body which will have a regional office in each of the five or seven new areas.

Education

The document proposes that current education structures should be replaced by a single education services support body which would bring together the functions of the five Education and Library Boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), Comhairle na Gaelscoláiochta (CnaG) and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE). These latter three bodies would then have only an advisory role.

The new body would employ teachers and run schools, with the Department of Education no longer having responsibility for direct delivery of education, but maintaining its role in development and implementation of policy, setting standards, monitoring and accountability. The document notes that “it is vital that the merging of administration of education support services does not diminish local sensitivity of service provision.”

There are two options proposed for youth services. Either, with overall responsibility remaining with DE, youth services could come within the single education support body or, alternatively, they could be transferred to local government.

Local government

The document proposes three options for future local government, consisting of seven, 11 or 15 councils with enhanced powers. It is proposed that these powers could include responsibility for planning, local economic development, tourism, urban and rural regeneration, rural development, arts and culture, community development and community relations, among others.

Since the aim is to keep public service delivery within shared boundaries, the decision on the number of councils is linked to the proposed number of health, education and other service delivery bodies.

The research undertaken by the review suggests that seven councils would be the optimal number. This would allow for all major service providers, including health, to operate to common boundaries (this is known as coterminosity) and also for the most even distribution of the underlying property wealth base. Councils would be serving populations ranging from 165,000 – 390,000 and each council would have up to 60 members. This is recommended as the most efficient option for service delivery. To offset the fact that there would be fewer, larger councils, the review team suggest the establishment of ‘civic councils’ where committees made up of elected representatives from a given area would have a role to consult locally and gather views to feed into the main council’s deliberations, addressing concerns about potential loss of local identity.

The second option is for 11 councils based on an amalgamation of current district council areas. These would cover populations ranging from 80,000 to 280,000 with up to 40 councillors (except for Belfast which could have 60). At this number there cannot be direct one to one correspondence between councils and health bodies, so some would have to match up on a two to one basis. This is judged to be less effective for community planning as health agencies would be dealing with the priorities of two councils. This model would be less economically efficient than the seven council model and “extra costs would be incurred compared to the present arrangements” for some services which might be transferred to local government. Eleven councils

would provide a less even spread of the underlying property wealth base in Northern Ireland.

The third option is for 15 councils which could either be based on parliamentary boundaries or on combinations of existing council areas. Belfast would have a population of around 350,000 with all others around 100,000 if parliamentary boundaries are used, otherwise the population covered could range from 55,000 to 280,000. This model would either lose the alignment with service delivery boundaries, which it is argued would make community planning more difficult, or align on a two to one or three to one basis. The model which uses parliamentary constituencies would obviously align with political boundaries. This model provides a more uneven distribution of the underlying property wealth base, but addresses issues of local identity which were raised by political parties.

As NICVA commented on the last RPA consultation document, the arrangements for local government are more focused on the best models for service delivery rather than on an in-depth investigation of democratic representation and the best models for representation of the interests of citizens and for deliberative decision making.

Other key changes

The RPA terms of reference took in almost 150 organisations, many of which were so-called Quangos. The document recommends that all public bodies should be reviewed to examine their accountability and question whether their functions should be transferred to either local or central government. There is a comprehensive list of public bodies provided along with recommendations for the future of each. The list includes the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Equality Commission, the Strategic Investment Board and the Housing Executive. Options for this last body include no change or transferring responsibility to new larger councils.

What does this mean?

There was overwhelming support in the first RPA for simplification of structures in Northern Ireland and this document seems to deliver that. Voluntary and community organisations had no fixed views on the preferable number of councils, however, there were concerns about lack of trust in local government and fears that transfer of services could mean that continuity and

best practice would be lost. The current document does emphasise the continuing role of the sector in several places.

The research carried out as part of the review does point to seven as being the most effective number of councils for delivering services and operating the proposed community planning model. Political parties were concerned that this was too few councils and that issues of local identity would be lost. However when the public were surveyed they indicated that they valued local identity but were not willing to pay more to have it safeguarded. The number one priority for most people seemed to be quality of service. NICVA was recommending a one-stop shop model where the public could go to one place and have information on and access to whole range of public services. The integrated model proposed in this document with shared boundaries for service delivery seems to be moving towards that model.

The model for education services removes a great deal of the fragmentation of current services, making sharing of services a much more realistic possibility in the future. There is also a commitment not to centralise staff and resources in the process. The role of the youth service is one which voluntary and community sector youth bodies would like to see remain aligned with education and there are concerns that handing these services over the local councils would break that link and move youth services towards a leisure model.

The proposals for enhanced local government largely rest on the community planning process being a success and it will be important to explore this model further. Experiences in Scotland, where one study trip has already visited, are at a very early stage and it is difficult to judge how successful the process will be. It will be in this integrated local process where the voluntary and community sector could potentially play a crucial role in articulating local needs and facilitating local participation. There may also be a link to the role of LSPs.

On the whole the proposals make sense in terms of efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery, trying to balance the needs of the user of public services with the most cost effective way of planning providing. It is estimated that the changes could generate savings of between £150 and £235m per year.

There is consideration of equality, human rights, rural and social needs issues in the proposals, although this does not constitute a full impact assessment.

How can I respond?

NICVA will be submitting a response and is asking all members to let us know their views on these important issues. This can be done via email, in person or via an online consultation method we are intending to pilot, about which we will send further details soon.

For a copy of the consultation document contact:

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Deadline for responses is 30 September 2005.

For more information and if you have any questions about the issues in this briefing paper, please contact Frances McCandless or Lisa McElherron at NICVA on 028 9087 7777 or frances.mccandless@nicva.org
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April 2005