

## Review of Public Administration Briefing Paper

This document is an overview of the recently released Review of Public Administration. It does not cover every aspect of the Review. Rather it attempts to pinpoint issues that will be of particular concern to the voluntary and community sector. The text in italics indicate some generic issues that voluntary and community groups might want to consider in their responses to the consultation. However many of the conclusions groups make, including selecting the model of public administration will obviously be based on their own area of interest. With this in mind groups with a particular interest are encouraged to read the entire document.

### **1. Background.**

The Review of Public Administration, (RPA) began in 2002, and is the first major review of the structure and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland in 30 years.

The RPA focuses on the review of the major public services which impact on the lives of people who live in Northern Ireland. This means:

- The services provided directly by central government such as roads, water and social security.
- The services provided by public bodies sometimes known as Quango's or Non-Departmental Public Bodies at regional and sub-regional level such as education.
- The services provided by local government i.e. councils, such as leisure facilities.

The services covered by the RPA cover 80% of public expenditure in Northern Ireland. Health and Social Services are subject to a separate review which is being undertaken by the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety.

### **2. What does the document say?**

The document lays out a number of characteristics or underlying principles of Public Administration (2.12) and asks what priority or weighting should be given to each one. Each section of the document outlines current practice in how public administration is structured in Northern Ireland, offers limited alternative examples of practice in other parts of the UK and ends with a number of key questions. Chapter 5 offers five models of public administration for consideration and explains what effect implementing these will have on central government, public authorities and local government.

The document is unusual in that it doesn't make any concrete recommendations. Rather it outlines what already happens, highlights some problems or concerns and asks how things can be improved. While this may be seen as an effective way of collecting public opinion it also asks very complex questions without giving enough information to assess the impact of possible answers. You get a sense that the document doesn't really *say* anything concrete as a lot of the more crucial decisions such as the number of councils, cannot be made until a new model for public administration is decided on. While this seems frustrating at first the document is important in that responses to it will form the basis of the model of public administration for the foreseeable future. If this document is viewed as part one of a process of consultation then it becomes easier to

work with. NICVA would be very concerned if this was the last step in the consultation process as there is much more to decide.

### **3. What are the key issues for the voluntary and community sector.**

#### **1. Participative Democracy.**

It is encouraging to note that the role of the voluntary and community sector is written into the document in relation to service delivery and that a number of underlying principles of public administration are mentioned (2.12). However there is very little discussion about the development of a more participative model of democracy across Northern Ireland. While the document looks at the nature and function of public service delivery there is very little discussion on the type of government that citizens of Northern Ireland want to see in terms of their relationship with the state. It is not enough to view citizens as consumers of services who are only concerned with what services they receive as the relationship between the citizen and the state is much more complex. *More consideration needs to be given to how we can work to create a truly representative, accountable participative and democratic system of governance.*

#### **2. Service Delivery.**

The document recognises that any changes must above all “deliver high standards of service to the community” (3.1). It outlines some of the main issues which were discovered during the research process. These include:

- A perception that for a population of 1.7million Northern Ireland is “over-governed”
- Lack of clarity in the roles each part of the public administration play ie who does what.
- Lack of co-operation and co-ordination between each part of the public administration system
- Varying standards of effectiveness of each public body when dealing with complaints

Paragraph 3.5 recognises the need for accessibility of services. However it makes no suggestions as to how this can be done and there is no question referring to accessibility at the end of the chapter. *NICVA believes it would be useful to suggest ways of making information accessible.*

Paragraph 3.6 refers to issues of rurality raising the point that people in rural areas feel their needs come secondary to the needs of people in towns and cities. Again there is no further information and no specific question asking for comments on this issue.

Paragraph 3.7 asks “what should be the role of the private, community and voluntary sectors in public administration?” This is a huge question and no additional information, alternatives or case studies are given. It suggests there is potential for Public Private Partnerships in the delivery of major services in Northern Ireland. However, it also opens the possibility of an increased role for social economy projects in the delivery of public services.

In terms of the voluntary and community sector NICVA believes that in many cases the sector is best placed to deliver effective and efficient services that meet real need. The voluntary and community sectors have developed highly successful and innovative ways of delivering services. Many of these services have been developed to meet gaps in the services provided by government. Voluntary and community organisations will want to continue and in many cases strengthen the arrangements they have with government in terms of service delivery but the sector should also remain independent of government and be free to offer opinions and, if necessary, criticism of government policy and practice. (As guaranteed in the Joint Government/Community and Voluntary Sector Compact.)

*NICVA believes that some of the key issues in this area might be:*

- *What are the principles which should govern any service level agreement or partnership between the sector and government? Eg the sector should not be seen as a simply a cheap way of getting things done.*
- *What works well about current service delivery arrangements between the sector and government?*
- *What needs to change?*
- *Are there any situations where the sector should not be delivering services on behalf of government?*
- *What is the potential for Public Private Partnerships?*

### **3. Community Planning**

Paragraph 3.9 deals with the area of joined-up government. It refers to Local Strategy Partnerships and the community planning processes used in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. It is difficult at the moment to envision exactly how community planning would work in Northern Ireland given that a model of Public Administration has not yet been decided. However in principle joined up community planning has the potential to deliver more focused and comprehensive services and *NICVA believes that all stakeholders should be involved in the drawing up and monitoring of community plans as opposed to being consulted on a draft plan.*

### **4. Public Appointments.**

Paragraph 4.7 deals with public appointments, claiming that given the size and the budgets of Public Bodies and the fact that large sections of the community feel excluded from applying for public appointment, there are concerns about the accountability of public bodies. Examples of public appointments include members of Health and Social Services Councils, members of Education and Library Boards and members of the Arts Council. *NICVA considers that a key issue will be how to make public appointment more accountable and accessible. By for example, simplifying the application process, targeting under-represented groups, providing information in accessible formats and supporting citizens who are interested in carrying out public appointments.*

### **5. Community Participation**

4.12 and 4.13 are concerned with community participation. They focus on the sense of local identity that has been developed in Northern Ireland over the last thirty years and

recognises that local council can help provide “a focal point through which the community can make its voice heard.” It acknowledges that groups with unique social needs might not be able to articulate these needs and “the emergence of the community and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland can be seen as a response to these circumstances” This theme of local community identity is carried on in paragraph 4.14 which discusses civic leadership and suggests that the fragmented nature of public services in Northern Ireland does not allow for strong civic leadership in the same way as local authorities do in other countries. In this area the key issues might be

- *Support for the concept of joined up government and the development of community planning which involve all relevant stakeholders.*
- *Clarity around the status of existing development and other plans such as District Council Community Support Plans.*
- *Support for involving communities in the policy development process and offer ways in which this can be done eg standing conferences, reference groups, focus groups, surveys and opinion polls.*
- *The fact that the voluntary and community sectors offer opportunities for civic leadership. Organisations and groups within the sector operate in an accountable and democratic manner contributing to the development of a participative democracy in which every citizen in Northern Ireland can play their part. Many voluntary and community groups also offer a focus for community life. This is most obvious in area based community development groups but also applies to issue based or thematic groups which unite people on an issue and provide a strong focal point eg lone parent support groups.*

## **6. Structure and function of public administration**

Chapter 5 of the document offers five different possible models for Public Administration and asks which model would work best. Again it is difficult to respond to this as, although there is some indication of the impact of choosing each model, *it is difficult to agree a model without knowing exactly what will be changed.* For example model 2 will result in the transfer of a large number of services to government departments but we do not know which services and how this will affect how the services are delivered in practice. *There is also no information about the most cost effective model which should surely be a major factor in deciding what will work best.* The document states that at this stage no decision can be taken about the number of organisations there should be under any model and that attention should be paid to the role and function of each area of public administration under each model. *However these two decisions are inter-related and it is difficult to select which model will work best without at least some notion of the practical changes this will make.* That said, however, the five models offered for consideration do give a good sense of the range of possibilities and an indication of how public administration may radically change. Each of the Models is summarised below with some comments on the implications each model will have for generic issues of accountability, civic engagement and service delivery.

Model One is the **status quo**. Keep things as they are and make no changes.

Model Two is the **Centralised Model**. Government departments would determine policy and be responsible for the delivery of services. There would be a few executive public bodies and some advisory bodies. Local Councils will have a minor role in service delivery but would provide representation and civic leadership. This model offers high levels of democratic accountability through the Assembly but low levels of localised input, a much more limited role for local Councils and a decrease in public appointments and opportunities for civic representation.

Model 3 is the **Regional and Sub-Regional Public Bodies Model**. The Executive and the Assembly would be responsible for policy and legislation and a series of sub-regional public bodies would deliver all services. These bodies would operate under the direction of boards which could be directly elected or appointed by Ministers. Local government would provide very localised services and a civic leadership role. This model offers low levels of democratic accountability but high levels of public appointments and civic representation. Under this model resources would be distributed according to local need.

Model 4 is **Reformed Status Quo with Enhanced Local Government**. This would mean that the Assembly, the Executive and government departments would have the same roles as at present. Most of the main public services would still be delivered by public bodies but the numbers would be reduced. Local Councils would assume a role in community planning and have membership on all key public bodies which operate in their area. This allows for no reduction in democratic accountability, a more rationalised and focused number of public bodies and a co-ordinated approach to service delivery controlled and planned by locally elected representatives. Local councils will have increased responsibility under this model. However the number of councils may be decreased. There is no indication as to why this should happen and how it will happen making it very difficult to make an informed decision.

Model 5 is the **Strong Local Government Model**. The Assembly and Executive would set the policy framework and standards, public bodies would be significantly reduced and local government would be enhanced and developed to become responsible for delivering the majority of services and have a strong civic leadership role. While regional democratic accountability through the Assembly would be decreased it would be increased at a local level. Again the number of Councils may be reduced and as services will be delivered in a much more localised basis, they will differ throughout Northern Ireland perhaps creating the “postcode lottery” situation that exists in England. That is you can only get certain services if you live in a certain area.

In relation to the developing role of local councils some attention needs to be paid to the issue of joint mandates ie Councillors who are also MLA's. This will be particularly important if local councils are given a scrutinising role. Is it reasonable that local Councillors be expected to act as scrutinisers of policy decisions that they themselves could well have made in their role as an MLA or is the continuity between policy maker and service provider useful?

#### **7. Health and Personal Social Services.**

This section refers to the fact that a separate review of H&SS is ongoing and acknowledges that the outcomes of each review must be complementary.

#### **8. Equality, Good Relations and Human Rights Considerations.**

In this section the Review team acknowledge their commitments under Section 75, human rights legislation, New Targeting Social Need and Rural Proofing. Respondents are asked to outline any possible implications that the models and proposals may have on equality and human rights issues.

#### **4. The Next Steps.**

The closing date for responses to the consultation is 27th February 2004 with responses to be sent to Review of Public Administration, Mc Kelvey House, 25 Wellington Place, Belfast BT1 6GD or [admin@rpa@rpani.gov.uk](mailto:admin@rpa@rpani.gov.uk)

NICVA is keen to receive as many comments and opinions as possible from our members when preparing our response. Details of the consultations conference are attached and we would also welcome any written comments to [lisa.mcelherron@nicva.org](mailto:lisa.mcelherron@nicva.org).

