



Briefing 08/18 March 2008

## **RPA Northern Ireland announcement about number of councils**

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and Email Contacts (Northern Ireland)

CC: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts (England, Scotland and Wales)

### Key issues

Announcement of change from 26 to 11 new local government districts

No further additions to the functions identified for transfer

Introduction of a statute-based council-led community planning process

Further detailed announcement due after the Easter recess

### **1. Introduction**

A Review of the local government aspects of the Review of Public Administration was agreed at an Executive Committee meeting on 5 July 2007. The review had three strands – developing a shared vision for local government, consideration of the number of councils and consideration of functions transferring to local government. The review is also considering decisions to develop a council-led community planning process and the complementary power of well-being.

Environment Minister Arlene Foster announced on 13 March the key decisions on the future shape of local government flowing from the review.

A further announcement will be made when the Assembly returns after the Easter break

An electronic version of the press release can be found at <http://northernireland.gov.uk/news-doe-130308-foster-announces-the>

A statement has also been made by the Local Government Policy Division.

### **2. Number of councils**

The Environment Minister announced that 11 new local government districts would be created as part of the review. She commented that “The current 26 local government districts will be rationalised to create 11 new local government districts, using the model referred to as 11 b, which was canvassed in the March 2005 RPA consultation document. This number will allow new council areas to deliver important services to communities in an efficient and effective manner.”

An announcement by the Local Government Policy Division (LGPD) notes that this configuration of councils provides the optimal grouping of existing councils and strikes a balance between reducing some of the diversity between the existing areas in terms of population characteristics and rating wealth, and promoting the ability of the councils and their communities to identify and interact with each other.

The Minister's announcement went on to describe the vision for local government being one where communities are vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable with citizens' requirements at the core. The critical role to be played by community planning was also highlighted.

### **3. Functions**

The Minister reiterated the nature of the functions to be transferred to the new councils although she did not provide any detail beyond that already announced. With reference to functions she said "In order for local government to fulfil its role as leader and shaper of communities, a range of functions will be transferred to the new local councils. These include aspects of planning, as well as rural development, the public realm aspects of local roads functions, urban regeneration and community development, a range of housing related functions, and local economic development and tourism."

### **4. Community Planning**

The LGPD statement noted that a statute-based council-led community planning process, assisted by a new power of well-being, will ensure that services are delivered to meet local needs and ambitions.

Equality and fair treatment considerations will be central to the work of local government to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society. To support this aim, a range of governance models with appropriate checks and balances will be developed, piloted, evaluated and placed on statute, to ensure the protection of the rights of all people in Northern Ireland and provide for fair, transparent and efficient decision making.

### **5. Continuous Improvement**

New models of service delivery, based on groupings of the new local government districts will also be developed to promote the efficient and effective delivery of services. Central government will support local government in driving towards the efficient delivery of services by the development, in partnership, of appropriate performance management systems and by developing proposals for a modernisation challenge fund that will support innovative and efficient practice.

### **6. The process**

The LGPD statement noted that the aim is to implement the structural reform package by 2011 with an immediate priority being to provide for the appointment of an independent Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to undertake a review.

Following the Easter Recess, the Minister proposes to bring forward a draft Local Government (Boundaries) Bill in the Assembly and seek the Assembly's agreement to deal with it by way of accelerated passage.

## **7. Comment**

### Review

APSE welcomes the progress made by the review of the decisions of the RPA and the Minister's announcement. APSE appreciates the need to instigate the review to ensure ownership of the RPA by the current administration that those currently in power are able to promote the benefits of RPA from a position of involvement and ownership in all stages of the process.

APSE has previously called for a schedule to be published which identified the expected dates of transfer as well as dates for review of how well the transfer of services has been implemented (focusing on the outcomes for service users). It should also include dates indicating when consideration of which further services should be transferred from departments to local councils and an indication of how far after this any identified services should be transferred. Such a schedule should be published at an early stage in the process to reflect the commitment the current administration has to ensuring an ongoing programme of transfer rather than this being a one off exercise without the opportunity to build on progress made to date. Hopefully such a schedule will be included in the announcement to be made following the Assembly's Easter break.

### Structure

This announcement concentrates on the number of councils rather than the functions. Clearly making a decision about the number of councils is fundamental to the future of local government in Northern Ireland. There have been arguments for and against the 7, 11, 15 and 26 council options throughout the 5 years duration of this debate.

Now that a decision has been made the responsibility has been passed to the officers and elected members of the existing and proposed councils to ensure the future councils work effectively. However they can only exercise this responsibility if they have appropriate capacity, resources, knowledge and support. Providing the relevant tools is a task for central Government.

No structure will work without the correct approach to local government and the process of change it is going through. With this in mind it is reassuring to hear the Minister say that "Our vision for local government is of a strong, dynamic local government creating communities that are vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable and have the needs of all citizens at their core. Critical to the delivery of services that are linked with local peoples' needs and ambitions will be the introduction of a statute-based council-led community planning process."

### Community Planning

APSE welcomes the introduction of a statute-based council-led community planning process, assisted by a new power of well-being, as a move to open, accountable government.

The stated commitment of the Executive Sub-Committee (as noted in the Emerging Findings report) to the decisions made regarding the community planning role means that there must be an inherent commitment to the provision of services at a local level. Community planning only works when there is real involvement by councils, other public sector bodies and stakeholders and most importantly local residents. They must be able to interact with the providers of local services and feel they have an influence over those services if it is to be beneficial. The level of effectiveness is based upon the extent of services delivered at the local level. Community planning for only a limited number of services could end up as no more than a focus group on remotely delivered services. There is common

acknowledgement that this is a vital stage in the development of public services in Northern Ireland. It is a fundamental requirement that the community planning, leadership and service provision roles of local government must come together to ensure continuously improving services are provided and that citizens are engaged with those delivering of services used.

### Functions

It is disappointing to note that there has been no addition to the functions identified for transfer. Whilst APSE welcomes the transfer of the functions which have been identified it appears that the Executive have aired on the side of caution when looking at which functions to delegate to the new councils. The trend across England, Scotland and Wales over recent years has been for central Government to move away from intervention in the provision of local services as demonstrated by the focus on the holistic approach local government can provide, the place shaping role and the leadership responsibility it has amongst other public sector service providers.

At present local councils in Northern Ireland have only limited functions and although the scope of those functions will expand there are justifiable reasons for transferring further services to the local level accountable to elected representatives. The opportunity to transform local government into a local place shaper must not be missed – it needs enhanced responsibilities to ensure it plays the role of an elected local body reflecting the aims and priorities of local people in the provision of a full range of public services.

The Local Government Policy Division has announced that there will be a review by the Executive of those functions to be delivered by local government 12 months after the new councils become operational and periodically thereafter.

### Continuous Improvement

The Minister's statement that "This number (of councils) will allow new council areas to deliver important services to communities in an efficient and effective manner" is in line with APSE's view that the drive to continuously improve and modernise local public services must go hand in hand with structural review. Surveys and customer consultation regularly highlight the fact that service users are infinitely more interested in the quality, cost and accountability of services rather than organisational arrangements of the council. As such, it is vital that effective use of ICT, best practice, innovation, partnership working and other business process improvements is in place and that local government retains a culture of review and improvement. The modernisation programme must be built into local government service provision whatever the state of progress with the RPA.

For further information please see APSE briefing 07/63 'Emerging findings – review of local government aspects of the RPA' available on the APSE website at [www.apse.org.uk](http://www.apse.org.uk)

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