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# **THE REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

**Briefing Paper  
Commissioned By:**

**Concordia**  
Partnership for Progress

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# 1. What is the Review of Public Administration?

1.1 The Northern Ireland Executive in its *Programme for Government* agreed to review the ways in which public services are structured and delivered. In June 2002 it launched the Review of Public Administration, the Terms of Reference which are as follows:

To review the existing arrangements for the accountability, administration and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland, and to bring forward options for reform which are consistent with the arrangements and principles of the Belfast Agreement, within an appropriate framework of political and financial accountability.

1.2 The importance of this exercise was best described by the (then) First Minister who argued that 'it is one of the major tasks facing the Executive and will be central to the way in which we deliver, structure and organise our public services in the future'<sup>1</sup>.

1.3 The Review is being undertaken by a multi-disciplinary team of officials in the Office of the Minister and Deputy First Minister, working with the advice of a group of independent experts. Some initial concerns were expressed that a Review, led by civil servants, would result in rather conservative plans for change. They could be reluctant to make radical proposals that might impact on their own administrative structures.

1.4 The key reasons for examining our system of public administration are:

- A perception that we are over-administered (too many public bodies).
- Lack of accountability of public officials who have operated under Direct Rule circumstances.
- The need to rationalise administrative structures as the Assembly (in suspension for the fourth time) struggles to meet the demands for more/higher quality public services without the ability to raise taxes (apart from regional rates).

1.5 Whilst politicians have generally welcomed the Review, the key criticism is that its remit excludes the 11 government departments established under the Belfast Agreement. The official position is that while the Review is likely to have implications for the *functions* exercised by the Executive, the *institutions* and the divisions of functions between the departments will not be part of the Review's remit. This is rather difficult to understand in practice in that if, for example, functions such as roads and water were removed from the Department for Regional Development and relocated elsewhere, it is highly unlikely that this department could be justified.

1.6 The inclusion of government departments was rejected on the grounds that the Review should not be used as a way of renegotiating the Belfast Agreement by the back door. Dismantling the eleven departments would have implications for power-sharing arrangements - a core element of the Agreement. As the Review (which includes government agencies) claims to cover 'around 80% of expenditure on devolved public services'<sup>2</sup>, the exclusion of central government departments appears less important than is first appeared.

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<sup>1</sup> Hansard: Northern Ireland Assembly - 25 February 2002

<sup>2</sup> The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland (2002): 8

## 2. The Existing System of Public Administration

- 2.1 The current administrative system in Northern Ireland is a complex range of bodies which have evolved in response to political circumstances since the early 1970s. These arrangements include 26 local councils with limited functional responsibilities, 11 government departments, 18 Executive Agencies, a large number of non-departmental public bodies (known as quangos<sup>3</sup>) such as the 5 education and library boards, 4 health and social services boards and associated health trusts, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.
- 2.2 Our administrative structures have not only created confusion in the minds of the public as to who is responsible for what service, but also led to accusations that we have too many public bodies for a population of 1.7m people. Importantly, however, there is much criticism about the accountable nature of our system of public administration because government appointees oversee many of the key public services (e.g. health, education and housing).
- 2.3 The starting point for the Review is that administrative structures are a means to an end. The public are disinterested in who provides these services, merely that they meet their needs and are accessible. Hence, the whole exercise must ultimately be seen as a way of improving

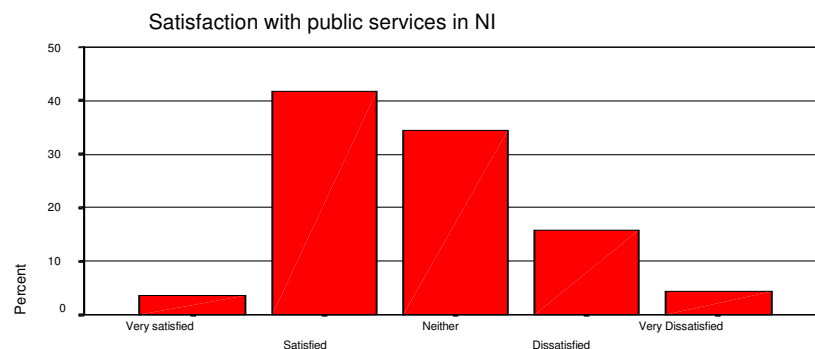


Figure 1

our public services. Recent survey evidence<sup>4</sup> suggests that there is significant scope for improvement (see figure 1).

- 2.4 The results show that 45% of respondents were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with public services in Northern Ireland. Some 20% stated they were either 'not satisfied' or 'not at all satisfied' with public services; and 34% reported they were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'. Thus there is no clear majority view on satisfaction with public services. Whilst such a general question posed of all public services undoubtedly disguises individual experiences of specific functions, this survey does provide a useful base line against which the success of any Review process can be judged.
- 2.5 The obvious follow-on from the above question is: which public services do people think are most in need of improvement? In rank order these were health and social services (42%), education (20%), roads (10%) and housing (9%) (see table 1 overleaf).

<sup>3</sup> Quangos or quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations are bodies which are set up at arms-length from government departments. They may be 'executive' (deliver a function) or 'advisory' (provide advice to government).

<sup>4</sup> Research Bulletin - Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey (October 2002): [www.rpani.gov.uk](http://www.rpani.gov.uk).

**TABLE 1: PUBLIC SERVICES MOST IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT**

	1 <sup>st</sup> Choice	Ranked	Number
Health & Social Services	42%		512
Education	20%		239
Roads	10%		128
Housing	9%		110
Employment Services	7%		84
Waste Management	4%		45
Environmental Management	2%		31
Planning	2%		25
Leisure Services	2%		21
Water	1%		15
Tourism	1%		6
Total	100%		1218

2.6 Whilst there is very strong support for improving health & social services and education respectively, it is interesting to note that these functions currently receive the largest share of public funds. In the 2002-03 public expenditure budget, for example, health, social services and public safety were allocated 39.6% of the overall budget (£6.4 billion); education 22%; followed by employment and learning (9.7%); regional development, which includes roads, (8.4%); and social development, which includes housing, (7%)<sup>5</sup>. Hence, there is a direct association between services considered 'most in need of improvement' and *Programme for Government* spending priorities.

<sup>5</sup> Source: Public Expenditure Plans 2002-03. Department of Finance and Personnel.

### 3. Emerging Debates in the Review

3.1 The Review Team issued a consultation paper in October 2003, the purpose of which was to 'bring forward a number of important issues which influence how, and by whom, services might be provided, and to set out for discussion a number of broad models of public administration'<sup>6</sup>.

3.2 The consultation document outlined 5 possible models for consideration in rethinking the reform of public services. These are summarised as follows:

- *Status Quo*: This model envisages no change to the overall structure of public administration.
- *Centralised*: Under this model all major services would be delivered directly by government departments.
- *Regional and Sub-Regional Public Bodies*: A range of public bodies, operating either regionally or sub-regionally, would deliver public services.
- *Reformed Status Quo with enhanced Local Government*: While keeping the main features of the current system, local government would be given new responsibilities.
- *Strong Local Government*: Major public services would be the responsibility of a smaller number of new councils.

3.3 The Review Team received some 170 responses by the close of consultation (29<sup>th</sup> February 2004) and is currently analysing them. Despite the absence of devolved government, it is expected that the Minister (Ian Pearson) will consider the outcomes of the consultation with political parties and publish firm proposals in the autumn for further consultation. Although speculative, a number of options for change are possible. These are discussed below.

3.4 ***Local Government***: Local authorities could be given the same status and powers as unitary (or single tier) authorities in Great Britain. Obviously for economy of scale arguments, this would mean a drastic reduction in their number. Suggestions include 4 unitary councils in line with the boundaries of the health boards; 5 unitaries within the current education and library boards areas; or 6 councils in the geographical county structures of Northern Ireland. These suggestions would need to take account of the likely community background composition of such proposals, as this will be an important factor in securing political approval.

3.5 Such a move would give councils control over education, social services, planning, libraries, waste collection & disposal, trading standards, fire and rescue, emergency planning, roads, economic development, highways and transportation, housing, environmental health, and leisure & amenities. In addition, there is widespread support for councils to be given the power of 'well-being', similar to that conferred in England and Wales under the Local Government Act 2000. This would give local councils powers to oversee the social, economic and environmental well-being of their areas.

3.6 ***Quangos and Agencies***: If agreement could be reached on the functions and form of local government based on the above, then the need for the remaining executive non-departmental public bodies might be examined. Where possible, their functions could be incorporated into

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<sup>6</sup> The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland (2002): 3

the 11 government departments or local councils. The existence of quangos can be justified on at least two broad grounds:

- Government may need bodies from which it can distance itself in sensitive areas;
- There is value in having temporary organisations outside the permanent service that can be scrapped when the need for such temporary arrangements no longer exists<sup>7</sup>.

3.7 In the case of the former, the Equality Commission is a good example, and the latter, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Both these areas are/were politically sensitive, respectively. Councils, for example, in the past could not be trusted to be objective in allocating housing. Times have changed and if devolution is to mature, public services should be vested in the hands of elected MLAs and local councillors. Hence, the list of executive and advisory quangos could be radically reduced. Clearly, some of the functions of government agencies could be re-located within local government.

3.8 **Modernisation:** There is a fundamental need for Northern Ireland to adopt a public service 'modernising' agenda. To date, many of the public sector reforms initiated in Whitehall have by-passed Northern Ireland, both at central and local government levels<sup>8</sup>. In part, this was justified on the basis that we were administratively 'different' and therefore the reform agenda was less appropriate. Our pre-occupation with constitutional and security issues also meant that Direct Rule Ministers paid less attention to public services. Opportunities now exist to adopt or adapt a reform agenda which will improve the quality of our public services and locate the service user at the centre of this change process.

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<sup>7</sup> C. Hood (1981) 'Axeperson spare that quango' in C. Hood and M. Wright (eds.) *Big Government in Hard Times*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.

<sup>8</sup> The equivalent of *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (DETR); *Modernising Government* (Prime Minister and Minister for the Cabinet); and *Reforming our Public Services: Principles into Practice* (Office of Public Services Reform).

## 4. Potential Impact on Local Strategy Partnerships and Social Partners?

4.1 The Review's consultation paper makes reference to the need for 'joined-up government'. In that context, it describes the role of Local Strategy Partnerships (LSPs) in formulating a plan primarily focused on the use of PEACE II money, aimed at reinforcing progress towards a peaceful and stable society and promoting reconciliation. The LSPs, however, see their Integrated Local Strategies in much wider terms - as a strategy for the economic, social and environmental development of each district council area. These strategies represent the framework for sustainable regeneration and development of the area beyond the lifetime of the programme.

4.2 The major orientation in the Review of Public Administration is likely to be towards greater democratic accountability of public bodies, hitherto run largely by appointees. This would suggest a focus on non-departmental public bodies or quangos and the possibility of their incorporation into public administration structures at either central or local government levels.

4.3 On the one hand the major political party in the recent Assembly elections (the DUP) has described the Civic Forum as 'an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy'<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand there is also enthusiasm from some influential figures to strengthen the role of the partnerships in the long term governance of Northern Ireland. The (then) Deputy First Minister (Mark Durkan) suggested in an Assembly debate:

Partnerships will have a vision and purpose which will last well beyond the horizons of the PEACE II programme...In the context of the new institutions, I see an opportunity for the partnership process to be widened and deepened at both regional and local level. We do not want the partnership approach to be confined to European funding, nor do we want it to wither away when that source of income has ceased. The whole purpose of our approach is to increase the scope and significance of decision-making at the local level<sup>10</sup>.

4.4 This signals intent on the part of Durkan to mainstream partnership governance in Northern Ireland. Clearly tensions are emerging between the formal democratic mechanisms and social partnership arrangements:

- The perception of 'privileged' access by the voluntary and community sector to civil servants during Direct Rule, although mistaken, is now being challenged.
- The Review of Public Administration is seen by elected bodies as a way of reasserting their authority after years of government by quango.
- More widely, the standing down of the Civic Forum with the suspension of devolution does not augur well for the inclusion of civil society in the deliberations of government.

4.5 Politicians stripped of political power under Direct Rule, and now subject to erratic spells of devolved government, are unlikely to be generous to social partners, some of whom they perceived as having an inside track during their period in the political wilderness.

4.6 Concordia supports the democratic principle that decisions relating to the governance of Northern Ireland should be taken by locally-elected politicians. However civil society can assist politicians by ensuring that they are better informed by those outside the government

<sup>9</sup> DUP quotations *Hansard* 25<sup>th</sup> September 2000 and 14<sup>th</sup> September 1998, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Durkan (2001) Local Strategy Partnerships *Hansard*. Northern Ireland Assembly 27<sup>th</sup> March.

machine of the economic and social consequences of alternative policy options. Within policy frameworks determined by politicians, civil society can work with politicians to ensure that the administration of public services is more sensitive to economic and social priorities.

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