

Update on funding

Previous issues of Reform Inform have advised that after an unsuccessful bid in June, Minister Attwood subsequently prepared and circulated a much more extensive bid for funding to support the local government reform programme. The Minister has and continues to stress the critical nature of the bid and that it should be urgently considered. Unfortunately, a bid in the January monitoring round has since been unsuccessful. The Minister has made it clear that upfront money now, soft loans later and help with rates convergence from 2015, is justified and necessary to protect ratepayers, and as such, an Executive paper has been re-circulated.

Recap: The latest bid from Minister Attwood comprises tens of millions of pounds covering the full budget period up to 2015. It includes the costs associated with Transition Committees, Change Managers, Shadow Councils, a severance scheme for councillors, capacity building, converging ICT systems and winding up legacy costs. At the same time however, the Minister is pushing councils on their own contributions. He believes councils need to accelerate procurement opportunities, acknowledge that the financial picture is very different and worse now than before, and identify new models of financing reform, including self financing opportunities.

Update on transferring functions

In December the Minister circulated a draft paper to Executive colleagues seeking clarity and a prompt decision on the package of functions (including staff numbers and funding) to transfer to new councils from central government departments.

In addition, he has written to Voluntary Transition Committees (VTCs) seeking their views on a proposed transfer scheme model for NI Civil Service employees who will move to the 11 new councils.

It is proposed that the starting point for the transfer scheme is the model used by DHSSPS during the reform of the Health sector. This model is also being used as the basis for civil service transfers in the Education sector and is consistent with the Public Service Commission's Guiding Principles for such matters which the Executive agreed should be applied across the whole Reform of Public Administration process.

Appointing new Council Chief Executives and Senior staff

There has been some uncertainty about recruitment of future Chief Executive and senior staff posts in the new 11 councils. No final decision has been taken on the method of appointing the Chief Executives. Discussions regarding the underlying principles and timings for competitions for senior staff are being taken forward within the implementation structures which the Minister has established. The Minister expects to receive recommendations shortly and settle the issue quickly. Legal advice is being taken to ensure the correct and proper route is followed.

Focus on...Antrim & Newtownabbey Voluntary Transition Committee

In the last edition, we told you that Reform Inform would be putting the spotlight on the work of VTCs and the Task & Finish Working Groups. First up is the Antrim and Newtownabbey VTC...

The Antrim and Newtownabbey VTC has been meeting regularly to progress the work associated with the creation of a new Council. Recent familiarisation visits, to key facilities across both Boroughs, proved successful in helping Councillors to find out more about each other's Council facilities and services.

Positively, the Voluntary Transition Committee has approved a work programme, which is already well underway. The purpose of this programme is to commence the activities which will steer both Councils through the transition period, towards a successful merge in April 2015.

Importantly, the VTC has already approved the Joint Communications Plan for the Local Government Reform programme. On a practical level, both Councils report regularly to their Members about the progress of Local Government Reform, and are actively working to coordinate the release of reform updates to Members and staff e.g. features in our existing team briefs and newsletters and for induction training sessions, common intranet sites are being developed, face to face staff information road shows are being delivered.

The Antrim and Newtownabbey Transition Management Team (TMT) meets monthly to progress the work programme which includes financial planning and a comprehensive audit of the service delivery models within both Councils. These meetings are also attended by representatives from the functions transferring from central government.

Management and Trade Union representatives from both Councils have already met and the Joint Local Consultation and Negotiation Forum will be formally established early in the New Year.

The current Mayors, Councillor Roy Thompson (Antrim) and Alderman Victor Robinson (Newtownabbey) commented:

“While there is still much work to be done, we’re very encouraged by the progress that we have already made towards amalgamation and we’re confident that if this continues we will make a successful merger of both Councils in 2015. We would like to thank Councillor Billy Webb and Councillor Brian Graham for their leadership in chairing the VTC meetings to date.”



Antrim and Newtownabbey VTC and TMT members on the familiarisation visit to Newtownabbey. The group stopped off to visit the Theatre at The Mill.

Update on councillors severance consultation

The Minister will, within the next few weeks, be issuing for consultation, proposals for councillors’ severance arrangements.

First meeting held of Political Reference Group

The first meeting of the Minister’s Political Reference Group took place on 20 December 2012. The purpose of the group is to seek party political views on issues as required by the Minister to inform his thinking as the reform programme progresses. The Minister does not intend this group to be overly formal and will only meet on an ad hoc basis.

At the meeting the Minister provided an update on reform funding, transferring functions, District Electoral Areas, the Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill, Statutory Transition Committees and elected member severance.

In response, members raised issues about the appointment of Chief Executives, contingency funding for the operation of Statutory Transition Committees, savings from the Improvement, Collaboration and Efficiency (ICE) programme being realised more in the longer term, the provision of funding to cover the cost of running the planning function, capacity building for councillors and pilots strengthening the plans for community planning.

Local Government Reform...COMMUNICATION MATTERS seminar

The Communications Task & Finish Working Group has now prepared a draft communications strategy and action plan to support the reform programme. Last week it hosted a seminar to test the strategy with key stakeholders. Issues discussed included:

- The communications roles and responsibilities of the various key organisations
- The communication roles of the incoming councils during the shadow period
- Internal communications
- The roles that other functions of the organisation play in effective communications
- Communication with elected members
- Communication with the business, voluntary & community sectors
- Evaluation of communication

A more detailed update on the seminar will be included in the next issue.