

## Regional Transition Committee

Wednesday 25 April, 2-4pm

### NOTE OF DISCUSSION

#### MINISTERS OPENING REMARKS

- Whilst stating that his preference would have been the delivery of the 15 council model, acknowledged the democratic mandate and decision taken by the NI Executive to move forward on 11 council model.
- RPA presents a real opportunity to create strong local government beyond just reconfigured council boundaries. The transfer of key functions such as planning and regeneration will be key enablers for councils and councillors to get things done locally.
- Advised that the Department wants to work in partnership with local government to take forward the reform programme and would hope that the RTC meeting would provide a forum to come to a shared understanding of what needs to be done.
- Whilst a lot of good work had previously been done, particularly in relation to policy and legislative development, there remains a complex programme of work ahead.
- Important that a structured and disciplined approach is taken to implementation.
- Acknowledged the apathy which exists across local government given the previous 'start –stop' approach taken to reform.
- Informed the group that he seeks to engage a wider stakeholder group to explore potential good practice which may inform the approach taken to reformed e.g.
  - o Minister and officials met recently with representatives from Community Places, Big Lottery and representatives from pilot councils (including Belfast) to discuss the outcomes from the community planning pilots with a view to identify potential learning which may inform the approach taken to community planning within NI.
  - o Minister and officials met recently with the Institute of Civil Engineers to discuss planning related issues.
- Minister acknowledged that whilst he will seek to ensure that external expertise and advice informs the approach taken by the department to delivering reform; the guiding principle will be that 'democratic interest will prevail'. Councillors will have a critical role in shaping the reform programme both at a regional and local level.

#### GENERAL COMMENTS FROM FLOOR

- Advocated the need to refresh the vision for local government which was established in 2008.
- Advocated the need for some form of central government funding to enable reform to happen.
- Advocated the need for the Minister to engage with the NI Executive, with the support of the LG sector, to secure potential funding for reform.
- Concerns regarding the inclusiveness of the regional implementation structures and the fact that it excludes 15 of 26 councils from the process albeit councils are able to rotate representation.
- Concerns regarding the number of NILGA representatives (i.e. 5) at the meeting vis-a-vis councils who are responsible for delivery.
- Local government must be engaged in any discussions in agreeing the package of functions.
- Transferring functions must be fit-for-purpose and rate neutral at point of transfer.

- Need for Transition Committees to have a **statutory** footing as soon as possible to enable them to get things done.
- Consideration to be given to the political engagement and potential representation on the regional operational delivery structures e.g. Regional Transition Operational Board and Working Groups.

## **MINISTERS RESPONSE**

### **(i) Funding reform programme**

- Advised that no Minister or party has approached the DoE Minister to put forward the view that central government should pay for local government reform.
- Minister stated that he is committed to working with local government to explore what options exist to enable councils to fund the reform programme.
- Minister pointed out that councils are best placed to identify potential costs/savings and therefore, the onus should be with local government to quantify the potential funding required.
- Minister noted that NILGA are working on funding paper and welcomed the opportunity to have sight of this in due course.
- Minister highlighted that some LG Chief Executives have previously indicated that local government reform can be funded through a 'self-financing business case' approach.
- Minister indicated that officials are currently exploring the potential for the department to provide limited financial support for specific areas of work e.g. programme management support for the Transition Committees, capacity building, funding to support developmental work around ICE etc.
- Minister highlighted the growing financial pressure on the NI Executive over the coming years and the impact of further budgetary cuts, Welfare Reform, Health reform, education reform etc. Pointed out that it is unlikely that the NI Executive will have a pot of uncommitted funding for reform.
- Minister informed the group that the PWC Economic Appraisal report which had been prepared in 2009 is currently being reviewed and refreshed.
- Minister highlighted the need to align the ICE programme with the reform programme. There is a need to fully exploit any collaborative opportunities. Need to recognise the potential for any efficiencies realised to support elements of reform.
- Minister outlined his disappointment at the level of demonstrable savings realised to date through the ICE programme quoting a figure of £200K.
- Minister informed the group that departmental officials are currently exploring what steps can be taken to provide councils with greater flexibility to fund elements of reform e.g. relaxation of current capital funding thresholds, re-profile council debt, potential creation of loan fund etc.
- Minister stated that it would be the intention that an options paper around funding will be submitted for the future consideration of the RTC.

### **(ii) Transfer of Functions**

- Minister stated that planning is the single largest and most significant function to transfer.
- Minister stated that it will be important that there are adequate resources within planning offices to ensure service continuity and to create certainty in terms of the contribution of planning in supporting wider economic and regeneration activity.

- Minister informed the group that work is underway to identify the optimum level of resources required to deliver the planning function over the next three years – this will ensure that the function is adequately resourced at point of transfer.
- Minister acknowledged the need to build capacity among all parties over the coming years to ensure the planning function is adequately delivered post transfer.
- **Initiation of Pilots** –Minister stated that he would be keen to initiate pilots across all 11 new council areas to start to explore the synergies and integration of key functions such as planning, regeneration and local economic development - linked to a wider community planning agenda.
- **Power of general competence** - Minister informed the group that departmental officials are currently reviewing the recent legislative developments in GB in relation to the move away from the 'power of well-being' to a broader 'general power of competence' for local government. Explained that in taking forward enabling legislation, a pragmatic approach will be taken.

(iii) **Reform Timetable**

- Minister provided an overview of the proposed reform timetable (copy of timetable circulated) and highlighted the slight slippage in the submission of the Boundary Order to the NI Assembly, indicating that the draft Order has just been submitted (copies of Order circulated).

(iv) **Boundary Order**

- Minister informed the group that the Boundary order includes proposed modifications to the new Belfast boundary in respects to Galwally (i.e. removal of Forestside and Castlereagh Civic Headquarters) and Ballyhanwood (i.e. removal of development site).

(v) **Reform Implementation Structures**

- Minister outlined the new local government reform governance and implementation structures being put in place. Explained that whilst he recognises the desire of local government that the implementation structures are much more inclusive, the scale of the challenge and the complex programme of work to be delivered in a relatively short term period necessitates that structures are as streamlined as possible.
- Minister explained that there will be continual engagement with local government throughout the process including regularly discussions with councils and clusters of councils. Stated his commitment to meet with all council clusters over the coming weeks.
- Minister acknowledged the desire of the majority of local government for transition committees to be given a statutory footing as soon as possible and informed the group that he has asked officials to explore the potential to fast-track this process.
- In response to the request for greater political representation on the regional operational delivery structures (e.g. RTOB and Working Groups), Ian Maye explained the importance of Members providing political direction and oversight and officers working through the detail, developing options and consequences and presenting for Members consideration.
- Ian Maye noted that there will key issues, particularly around governance matters, which Members will need to consider in detail and provide direction.

(vi) **Belfast Transition Committee**

- A Member from Lisburn City Council enquired as to the current position regarding (i) potential representation from Lisburn and Castlereagh on the Belfast voluntary Transition Committee and (ii) process for discussions among Lisburn/Castlereagh and Belfast regarding potential transfer of assets and liabilities.
- Ian Maye provided an update on the current position in regards to these issues i.e.:
  - (i) Stating that there is no requirement for representation from Lisburn and Castlereagh on the Belfast voluntary Transition Committee; however, there will be representation on the 'Statutory' Belfast Transition Committee albeit this representation will need to be representative of the areas to transfer.
  - (ii) stating that the current position regarding the potential transfer of assets and liabilities from Lisburn and Castlereagh to Belfast, is that discussions will be taken forward on the basis of negotiation.
- Cllr Deidre Hargey outlined the desire of Belfast City Council to engage at an early stage in discussions with both Lisburn and Castlereagh to progress a number of transition related issues and suggested that a meeting could be arranged between political representatives from Lisburn/Castlereagh and Belfast.

(vii) **Local Government Reorganisation Bill**

- The Minister advised that the Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill will be placed before the Assembly in the Autumn and it is founded on decisions and recommendations from the SLB and PDPs. He advised that he has deviated very little from the initial recommendations of these groups.
- Minister stated that it is hoped that the Bill will be passed within a 6 – 8 month period, however, the Environment Committee have already indicated that they may want to extend the time allocated for scrutiny.
- Ian Maye explained that the Department had previously consulted upon the policy proposals (Nov 2010) and would not intend to consult upon the draft Bill. Highlighted that there will be opportunity to engage with the Environment Committee and NI Executive in regards to the draft Bill – both of which are likely to consult/call for evidence.

(viii) **Schedule of RTC meetings**

- Thurs. 21 June 2-4 pm in BCC LDC
- Thurs. 30 August 2-4 pm in BCC LDC
- Thurs. 1 Nov 2-4pm in BCC LDC
- Wed 30 Jan 2013, 2-4pm in BCC LDC
- Wed. 27 March 2012, 2-4pm in BCC LDC
- Wed. 22 May 2013, 2-4pm in BCC LDC