

# **Bryson House Response to** **The Review Of Public Administration** **In Northern Ireland**

## **Introduction**

Bryson House is a large voluntary organisation that responds to emerging and existing social need across Northern Ireland. Its operations include social care projects, family services, opportunities for unemployed people environmental improvement and energy efficiency. As a result of this diverse portfolio staff and managers interface with an extensive range of public service organisations in purchasing and providing relationships and also partnership arrangements. Bryson House also interfaces with individuals and communities in need including Black and Minority Ethnic communities across Northern Ireland

It is against this background that Bryson House will respond to the Public Administration Review.

## **Process**

The Charity brought together a small representative group of staff from within the organisation who decided that our response would prioritise the issues of coordination, efficiency, participation and roles and responsibilities. It was also decided to connect this response to the proposed models and their limitation and/or benefits. Finally the group has chosen the model that with minor adaptation would we believe deliver an effective and publicly accountable service to the whole community of Northern Ireland.

## **The Models**

The Bryson House team gave consideration to each model and concluded the following.

- **Model 1 – Status Quo**

The current structure of Public Administration was constructed as an appropriate response to the political, civil and social crisis of its time i.e. early 1970's. Clearly there was a need to segment government and public services to make up for the democratic deficit and to let communities feel their services were in touch with their needs. As a result of delegated powers to departments it was reasonable that bodies such as Health and Social Services Boards, the Housing Executive, and Education Boards were created in addition to local services from local councils with limited powers. The layers of regional management and delivery of services was further increased by the general management principles applied by the conservative government in the 1990's which led to Health and Social Services Trusts. While Bryson House was successful in carrying out its functions within this structure and appreciate the relationships it, cultivated within it the systems have also appeared overly complex and bureaucratic.

When tested against the current situation, Northern Ireland, is over managed with too many layers and planning processes that lack transparency and are inaccessible to many. Roles and responsibilities are blurred as decision making moves between the Executive Assembly (when constituted) Departments, Boards, Health and Social Services Trusts, other Public Bodies and local councils. There is a perception of little or no public accountability and an over emphasis in bureaucracy for a population of approximately 1.7 million.

Bryson House would therefore not be in favour of maintenance of the current structure of Public Administration in Northern Ireland.

- **Model 2**

Bryson house has interpreted Model 2 as a shift of the responsibility for efficient, participative and accessible Public Services to Government departments.

While the Charity would welcome the continued dispersal of Civil Service departments into the community and across Northern Ireland there would remain major areas for concern. The compartmentalisation of service planning and delivery would be paradoxical to the experience of Bryson House and the Voluntary Sector. Social Action and the realisation of policies is best achieved in a joined up environment where the organisational culture is naturally responsive and cooperative. This is contrary to the nature of Government institutions

Departmentalisation has implicit in its structure the lack of democratic accountability and transparency and is not in alignment with the progress made on Public and Community participation in Northern Ireland. Model 2 is not a satisfactory response to the Public Administration needs of Northern Ireland.

- **Models 4 – 5**

Initially these models appeared most progressive and in keeping with democratic accountability in the traditional sense of electoral choice.

On the surface they also reflect the experience of the other three countries in the United Kingdom.

In an effort to realign Northern Ireland Model 4 does not go far enough, which results in a quasi structure that retains some of the problems of duplication and over management.

Model 5 has much to recommend it and the contemporary local authority structure and in particular paid officers have demonstrated they can be responsive and responsible when providing for their Communities.

There was however, an unease within the group about public confidence in the perceived ability of local Authorities to be objective and equitable in what is now the Multicultural Society of Northern Ireland.

This model maybe an ultimate goal but rightly or wrongly a period of preparation and public confidence building would, we believe, be necessary.

- **Model 3**

The working group believes that Model 3 with some small amendments may be a useful framework that meets the standards of coordination, participation and efficiency.

As stated earlier Northern Ireland has a relatively small population of approximately 1.7 million. The emergence of a democratically elected Assembly of 108 members with a representative Executive is we believe an appropriate and accountable mechanism to ensure public

confidence, accessibility and equity in the planning and delivery of public services. It is however, also acknowledged that the democratic authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly would be enhanced by representation from Black Minority Ethnic groups and other groups identified in equality legislation.

In this model:

The relationship between the Executive Assembly, public bodies and communities has become clearer as do the roles and responsibilities;

The Assembly is democratically elected by the people of Northern Ireland on a regionally equitable basis;

From the Assembly emerges the Executive with governance arrangements that will satisfy the majority of the electorate;

It is the responsibility of the Executive to set and drive public policy;

The Executive will be advised by departments with regard to policy matters which adds a knowledge that should increase the effectiveness of the policy aims and objectives;

The validity and outcomes of the policy can then be scrutinised by Assembly Members and Departmental Committees. Departmental Committees in their turn can take advice and representation from community groups, the voluntary sector and business interests that are directly affected by policy decisions;

The provider mechanism through public bodies with proven track records for efficiency and achievement can then be scrutinised and monitored by the Northern Ireland Executive;

The arrangements between Public Bodies and the community voluntary sector can then be made in relation to the implementation of 'Pathways to Change' (ref. Bryson House response March 2004) which strengthens the position and funding of the sector within Northern Ireland.

Bryson House recognises this proposal reduces the role and most likely the size of the existing local authority system in Northern Ireland but would suggest that the democratic accountability is satisfactorily met by the existence of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

### **Conclusion**

The Bryson House response assumes that a Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive will exist and will be sustainable. It attempts to give any new Public Administration a direct connection with a democratically elected structure and an ethos of engagement with local people in addition to the community, voluntary and business sectors. We believe Model 3 demystifies decision-making, encourages scrutiny and retains a place for knowledge in policy development.

Finally the outcome and outputs of Public Policies within this model are clear, measurable and attributable to those responsible.

It is hoped that these considerations are helpful to the debate.

**Bryson House**  
**February 2004**