

# REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Chief Executives' Forum welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Review and its findings to date.
- 1.2 The Forum is the association of chief executive officers of public bodies in Northern Ireland. It comprises the chief executive officers of government departments and agencies, local authorities, executive non-departmental public bodies and a number of statutory officials. This submission reflects the wide range of strategic interests represented in the Forum's membership.
- 1.3 The Forum accepts that Northern Ireland has a large, complex and unique system of public administration. It is a system that has evolved partly in response to the deep-rooted problems of a divided community, including at the regional level the absence of devolved and locally accountable political institutions for most of the last 30 years.
- 1.4 Progress in the peace process, accompanied by changed political circumstances will help bring about a more peaceful, inclusive, stable and, in the end, a more prosperous society. The challenge is to create a streamlined public sector, geared to the needs of citizens and based on a long-term view of the anticipated scale of government intervention in the economy—in tackling social needs and underpinning economic activity, in providing public services to households and firms, and by way of public investment in the region's infrastructure.
- 1.5 Whatever arrangements emerge from the Review, it is the Forum's view that the main focus should be on providing effective and efficient public services with appropriate arrangements for public accountability. Emerging new structures should be flexible so that public services can more easily respond to the changing needs and choices of individual citizens and, in this respect, the Review needs to consider the question of central direction and control. At the same time, the Forum advocates the development of a climate in which public service providers are encouraged to be more innovative. As the nature of problems and challenges changes, providers must be free to generate new ideas and new ways in which to set about achieving the broader social

and economic outcomes that Government and the political process wish to achieve.

## **2.0 Broad Principles**

- 2.1 The system should be reformed around a flexible model of public administration capable of delivering real choice within a framework of regionally determined or adopted national standards and accountability. Recognising that it will hopefully be the role of the Northern Ireland Assembly and a regional administration to allocate resources in line with politically determined priorities, any new system should be capable of a variable geometry providing for different sets or configurations of functions.
- 2.2 The Forum accepts that it has a role to play in building confidence and capacity with regard to the system of public administration in whatever form it should take. However, while emphasising the advantages of flexibility and a flexible architecture, the Forum affirms the general principle that delivery should be devolved to localised bodies and local networks or partnerships. Local and individual needs are better understood and dealt with locally. Nevertheless some functions and services are, for a variety of reasons, best organised and provided for on a regional or sub-regional basis so that the Review needs to consider what is provided centrally and what is provided locally.
- 2.3 While reflecting local priorities any new system must, whether services are organised locally or regionally, be capable of providing equity in entitlement and consistency of approach. In practical terms the responsibilities of different authorities should be such that functions are geographically aligned.
- 2.4 Reformed organisational arrangements must reflect the changed and changing environment within which the public services operate. A system capable of delivering only the 'one size fits all' solutions traditionally associated with the bureaucratic model is no longer appropriate. Northern Ireland needs a system that is responsive to change and can itself change quickly, reconfiguring to meet new challenges, implement new policies and address new priorities. At the sharp end the system must be capable of the more personalised delivery that is necessary to meet the ever more diverse needs and preferences of users. It is not only a matter of what the citizen-customer expects, but one of how

people are treated—better informed and enabled to make decisions for themselves.

- 2.5 The programme of reform should recognise that it will be necessary to manage the process of change. This will be manifest in new training needs, increased demands on senior personnel and support for staff at all levels. The Chief Executives' Forum is uniquely placed to assist Government in driving forward this challenging agenda.
- 2.6 The public services in Northern Ireland have within their ranks many talented individuals and high levels of expertise. Managing the change will require the public sector to harness the energy of a more diverse cadre of leaders, with a broad range of skills, experience and talent.

### **3.0 Local or Localised Services**

- 3.1 Whatever arrangements emerge from the Review, improved communication between providers and citizens is seen as crucial. Service networks and effective decision-making authority should be placed close to the local and community interests served. Continuous engagement between citizens and public service providers should be encouraged so that improvements in service quality, performance, productivity and, importantly, strengthened communities can emerge.
- 3.2 Whether services are organised locally or at regional level, the focus of any system must be on customers and citizens—the end users of public services and those who pay for them—and on what is to be delivered and how it is delivered.
- 3.3 To be fully effective, local service providers will require effective decision-making authority and discretion in the use of resources so that they can do things differently from their neighbours, where this is appropriate based on local needs and evidence of good practice, but within an overall structure that allows services to be both universal and diverse and competitive in terms of cost and quality.

### **4.0 Regional or Area-Based Services**

- 4.1 Economies of scale with respect to more specialised services will mean that certain functions are best organised either regionally or on a sub-regional basis. A key factor in deciding what form of organisation is appropriate will be the effective brigading of key professional and closely allied services.

- 4.2 It is the view of the Forum that government departments should be charged with delivering only services that:
- Have regional application and are delivered to a tightly controlled common standard or entitlement; and
  - Are politically sensitive to the extent that a government minister is highly likely to be asked to account for individual failures or shortcomings in the way in which policy is implemented on a day-to-day basis.
- 4.3 Otherwise the Forum advocates that policy—its formulation, enactment and, beyond that, monitoring the extent to which policy objectives are being met—should be separate from delivery and accountability for performance. Where services are to be delivered (or clearly defined functions are to be routinely pursued) on a regional, sub-regional, or area basis, then responsibility should be devolved to specialised bodies the governance arrangements for which should reflect the localities and communities served and the nature of the services for which the body has responsibility.
- 4.4 Large-scale capital projects, such as major road or transport initiatives or other improvements more generally to the region's infrastructure, are best delivered by strategic authorities that have a regional remit and an effective sub-regional presence. The new structures should reflect this, by either retaining the functions centrally in an Executive Agency where the focus is on delivery rather than policy or in another form of regional operating authority.
- 4.5 There are also a number of tightly focused policy interventions that have a regional dimension, but as they tend to involve low volume activities of an ancillary nature they are probably best delivered through specialised smaller public bodies.

## **5.0 Shared Interests and Services**

- 5.1 A key value that should be reinforced in any new system of public administration is the promotion of collaboration as opposed to competition in the delivery of services. This is especially important with respect to tackling more difficult issues that transcend the boundaries of responsibility of different organisations and levels of government and which require an integrated or joined-up approach to the delivery of cross-cutting policies.

- 5.2 More and more engaging the complex problems of modern society requires the capacity for different agencies to co-operate and collaborate effectively—to form networks and engage in joint decision-making, and to create joint task groups and virtual organisations around the commitment of pooled or complementary resources in pursuit of common objectives. These sorts of models and arrangements are what the Chief Executives' Forum is uniquely placed to facilitate. They are subject only to the test of what is in the public interest and: 'What do we need to do to make this happen?'
- 5.3 Part of the answer to the preceding question is more investment in information and communications technologies. At the front end of public services their collaborative instincts should be harnessed to provide better, shared public access to services with, for example, single point of entry to a range of services (one-stop shops, common call centres, and relay referral facilities). In this regard a key feature of any new system of public administration should be on how it will harness and exploit new technology to provide as seamless as possible range of services to the public and, in terms of the effective networking of organisations behind them, a more cohesive system of government.
- 5.4 While the system of public administration should provide a network of organisations each geared towards its core set of responsibilities they should have the flexibility to come together to address common problems and to divest themselves of essential but non-core business processes. Opportunities should be sought for corporate or back-office functions such as finance, IT, procurement, human resources and maintenance to be shared or out-sourced.

## **6.0 Working with the Private and the Voluntary and Community Sectors**

- 6.1 As indicated above, more and more chief executives see their role and that of their organisations as being to 'make it happen'. This means having an enabling as well as provider role.
- 6.2 Many public services have enthusiastically engaged in cross-sectoral partnerships of all sorts whether such arrangements are of a statutory nature, funding inspired or opportunistic. The Forum sees a bigger role for both the private and voluntary sectors. Players from both sectors bring different sets of skills to bear.

- 6.3 The private sector has traditionally provided a range of supplies and services to the public sector and now brings capital and private sector innovation and management skills.
- 6.4 The voluntary sector has an acknowledged and important role to play in wider social policies for developing communities and social inclusion. It has a significant track record in tackling deprivation and meeting social need. And, it has a unique ability to put users and communities at the heart of service delivery.
- 6.5 Any new arrangements should facilitate a greater involvement of the private and the voluntary and community sectors as long-term providers of services where they are seen to add value.

## **7.0 Conclusions**

- 7.1 Threaded through this response are a number of themes and issues that the Forum would wish to highlight and summarise.
- 7.2 The four key themes are:
- Customers—the end users or beneficiaries of public services, what is delivered and how it is delivered;
  - Capacity—issues to do with resources, competence and the efficient deployment of the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to achieve politically determined outcomes and the efficient delivery of services;
  - Governance—arrangements for securing openness, clarity and honest accountability for what is done; and
  - NGOs—the role and contribution of the private and voluntary sectors
- 7.3 Other important issues reflected in this response are:
- Connectivity—the way in which an organisation engages with its users and wider interests;
  - ‘Co-terminosity’—the alignment of organisational boundaries and capacities;
  - Coherence—co-operation and partnership with other agencies to address difficult issues; and
  - Innovation—the successful exploitation of new ideas and the continuous development of the machinery of government.

- 7.4 The arrangements which are put in place must be such that they build the trust and confidence of the people the public services are meant to serve; that they ensure that needs and policies can be adequately researched; that an important place is given to consultation and communication with users and those affected by policies; that there are the right checks and balances on executive action; and that overall there is consistency, transparency, probity and proper accountability.
- 7.5 However, the central thrust of this response has been to highlight the need for flexibility. In this regard, if flexibility and choice for the customer are to be beacons of reform, then accountability outwards to the customer must be reconciled with accountability upwards to departments and regulators.
- 7.6 The Review has produced much in the way of very useful research and evidence gathered about public administration. This has included surveys on how the public views services that are provided by the public sector and studying models of public administration in other countries. It is the Forum's view that this research should be built on and developed so that there is a better understanding, from the bottom up, of what people want and need from their public services and, just as importantly, how needs change over time. If public services are to become more responsive then they must develop more sensitive antennae and the means by which to co-operate in the area of customer research and analyses.
- 7.7 Again emphasising the importance of flexibility—in this instant, institutional flexibility—the system of public administration should be designed to enable it to more easily disaggregate and reconfigure functions and services in order to better respond to ever-changing needs, circumstances and political priorities.
- 7.8 The Forum would therefore suggest that within the next stage of the Review urgent consideration should be given to how capacity and the transferability/mobility of managerial and professional expertise can be developed and more easily re/deployed within the public service at large. In recent years great stress has been placed on the values of public service and the need for robust systems of governance, but while this response has taken careful cognisance of these important factors, the success of any new arrangements will depend on the public services having the right people in the right places. Ultimately this is a capacity question and one that will involve thinking through the qualities and competences that need to

be developed for the future. The Forum stands ready to assist chief executives and their organisations to effect the challenging, but necessary, transitions.

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