

Message from Nigel Hamilton

When the Secretary of State announced the changes to Northern Ireland's system of public administration he signalled the most wide ranging reform of public services for more than a generation. The changes that he envisages are a tremendous opportunity for world class public services that have a significant part to play in a fair and just society and the further development of a vibrant economy.

In the future public services will be delivered in a more accessible, innovative, fair, efficient and effective way for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland. The RPA is not the only major change underway, the programme of reform for the NICS will have a direct impact on how services are provided. Public servants and civil servants are at the centre of these changes which seek to put the citizen first and I am proud of the contribution you are already making to ensure that this goal is achieved.

The Secretary of State has appointed David Hanson as minister with overall responsibility for the implementation of the Review of Public Administration (RPA) and the wider reform programme. Ministers have agreed a timetable for the RPA and I have personal responsibility for overseeing the process to ensure that this is carried through. I do this by chairing the RPA Steering Group which consists of permanent secretaries and others who report progress and provide advice. This group meets on the first Friday of every month after which I provide David Hanson with updates on progress against the timetable.

But most of the work falls to Departments and the public sector bodies affected by the decisions. Programme and project management arrangements are in place to drive forward implementation and a unit at the centre in OFMDFM will help me with my oversight role.

These changes affect over 150 organisations and around 180,000 people. I realise that many of you have concerns about your jobs and what all of this means for you. How will you be informed and consulted on what is happening and where can you find out what is going on? All of this is understandable in this climate of change.

Arrangements have been put in place to ensure that you have an input to how these major reforms happen. Firstly, your employer has an obligation to consult you and your representatives on the proposed changes. It may be that we are not able to answer all your questions and address all concerns immediately but we will tell you whether we can or cannot.

Secondly, a Public Service Commission (PSC) has been established to recommend to government 'guiding principles and steps necessary to safeguard the interests of staff and to ensure their smooth transfer to new organisations'. Ministers expect all organisations to comply with PSC recommendations where these have been accepted. The Commission is already having an impact, recommending to Government that there must be an effective communications strategy to inform everyone and keep

them informed about what is happening. A copy of this recommendation is attached.

Thirdly, trade unions have a crucial representative role in the implementation process. The PSC recommendations do not substitute for detailed consultation and negotiation with trade unions at a sectoral and individual organisational level. I have established a Central Joint Forum with the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NICICTU) that will meet monthly to agree principles for RPA implementation, provide a mechanism for ongoing liaison with the PSC, consider equality implications and consult on cross-sectoral issues.

I am ensuring that you are kept informed in a number of ways. I have asked the central unit to provide the most up to date information on its website www.rpani.gov.uk. An overall communications strategy has been agreed and this will be the guide for organisations to keep you informed, a copy of this strategy is available on the RPA website. Each sector has websites from which you can also get information and some Departments are already supplementing this with newsletters and staff roadshows. If you can't find this you can get the links and signposts to it through the above site.

Examples of the types of information that are or will be made available include:

- each month the minutes of the Steering Group meetings will be published on the RPA website;

- PSC recommendations will be circulated to each organisation and will also be available on the RPA website;
- Central Joint Forum agreements;
- the structural arrangements for implementing the programme of change in each Department ;
- a bank of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's);
- communications arrangements in each organisation affected by the RPA decisions; and
- an opportunity through the website for you to provide input and feedback

Finally, I want to reiterate my appreciation and thanks for your continuing hard work in managing this enormous programme of change.

NIGEL HAMILTON

Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service

FIRST GUIDING PRINCIPLE AND ASSOCIATED RECOMMENDATIONS

AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Introduction

The Public Service Commission's first guiding principle and associated recommendations, under its remit "*to make recommendations to government on the guiding principles and steps necessary to safeguard the interests of staff and to ensure their smooth transfer to new organisations established as a consequence of government decisions on the Review of Public Administration, taking into account statutory obligations, including those arising from Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.*", deal with the absolute requirement for an effective communications strategy.

Context

The Public Service Commission welcomes the establishment of the Steering Group which will oversee the implementation phase of the Review of Public Administration. The Commission understands that the Steering Group will focus its attention on those significant, cross-cutting, themes which are central to delivering an extensive change programme. The indications are that more than 100,000 people, in central and local government and a host of other public sector organisations, will be affected by the changes announced by the Secretary of State in November 2005 and March 2006.

Guiding Principle

Government, and the Steering Group, should be guided by the principle that the support and involvement of staff, and their staff representatives, is required to give positive effect to change. The Commission considers that such cooperation will be readily forthcoming provided that people are treated with dignity and respect. Regular communication, particularly in relation to the personal and specific effects of change, will provide a large degree of comfort and reassurance to each individual person who is proud to serve in the public sector.

Recommendations

The Public Service Commission recommends that the Steering Group ensures that arrangements are put in place, as a matter of urgency, to ensure that all staff are informed, in a timely way, about how change is to be implemented and what arrangements are planned to safeguard the interests of staff and secure their cooperation during, and after, the period of change. Such arrangements should be subject to industrial relations procedures to ensure staff representatives are properly involved in the processes.

The Commission further recommends that each organisation provides its staff with an identified contact point (or contact points) to which RPA specific queries might be directed, or from which staff might seek RPA specific information.

In relation to formal communications, the Public Service Commission recommends that electronic means of communication, including e-mails and websites, should be supplemented by the prudent use of regular newsletters, and direct contact through seminars, workshops, conferences and staff meetings.

Commentary

The Public Service Commission acknowledges that different sectors are working to different timeframes and that some organisations are already involved in the change process and may have embarked on their own communications strategies. Nevertheless, the Commission wishes to distinguish between communication and consultation in the context of safeguarding the interests of staff.

The Commission attaches a great deal of importance to the need for employers to have due regard to statutory obligations¹, or the application of good practice flowing from those statutory obligations, so that employees, and their staff representatives, are informed, and consulted, in a timely way. That being the case, the Commission calls on the Steering Group to ensure that any proposed actions should be subject to existing industrial relations arrangements, before formal communications are conveyed to staff. Where no appropriate industrial relations machinery exists, organisations should proceed, urgently, to establish suitable mechanisms.

The Commission regards the principal aim of the communications strategy to be *“to guarantee that timely, consistent and relevant information reaches all staff, in all of the organisations affected, and in such a way as to ensure that relevant queries are dealt with efficiently and effectively.”*

SID McDOWELL
CHAIRMAN
Public Service Commission

15 May 2006

¹ The Information and Consultation of Employees Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005