

SUBMISSION BY THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND IN RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION DOCUMENT PRESENTED BY THE REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland recognises the immensity of the task facing the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland and welcomes the circulation of this initial Consultation Documentation. We also welcome the stated aim of achieving a shared understanding of the characteristics which the Northern Ireland community values in their administrative systems, while acknowledging the diversity of that community.

2. The tensions that the Community Foundation sees in underlying those values are -
 - Partnership working vis-à-vis the time and expertise that it takes to ensure that partnerships are equal and effective

 - Democratic accountability vis-à-vis a party political system that is often focused on constitutional issues outside of the remit of local administration

 - Quality of service vis-à-vis the optimum scale of delivery of service

 - Innovation vis-à-vis an often risk adverse audit-driven culture

 - Cross-community concerns vis-à-vis the continuing existence of a sharply divided society; and

 - Respect for equality and human rights in a context that is not noted for a shared cross-community understanding of these values.

The Community Foundation does not feel that the priority should be listing and highlighting the characteristics of any future system of public administration as suggested in Question 1, but rather developing a matrix of values and clearly identifying those that are contested in practice in order that further focused discussion can be facilitated around these as they will impact on future arrangements.

3. The Community Foundation welcomes the recognition of the role of the Community and Voluntary Sectors. It would encourage the Review Group to bring a greater clarity to the role and contribution of these often very different sectors (particularly as they relate to issues of governance). It would be useful for the Review Group to relate to the ongoing work of the Ministerial Task Force on the Resourcing of the Community and Voluntary Sectors (Department for Social Development) who are currently considering these issues.
4. One of the most basic requirements for a system of 'joined-up' planning and governance would seem to be a set of coherent administrative boundaries. The current disjuncture between the boundaries of the Health Boards; the Education & Library Boards; Northern Ireland Housing Executive districts and Local Authority boundaries currently frustrates any joined-up approaches. The multiplicity of different partnerships - while all undoubtedly well-intended - is also proving a drain on effective levels of participation. There also seems to be a lack of 'joined-up ness' in the overlay of new strategic initiatives from Departmental level (e.g. Neighbourhood Renewal; Health Action Zones; etc.). There is also a sense of growing frustration at community level about the plethora of new strategic approaches, while service level agreements for the community-level delivery of existing ones are cast in doubt (e.g. the position of the five Belfast Partnership Boards originally proactively promoted by Making Belfast Work).
5. There should be a clear role for the private, community and voluntary sectors in public administration (while putting safeguards in place to deal with any possible conflicts of interest concerning tendering for service delivery etc.). The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland has long argued for a complementary development between representative democracy and participative democracy. We realise that these are often portrayed as oppositional forces in Northern Ireland, which may be understandable given the meagre local experience of the exercise of power in this society. However it is our belief that as our democratic system matures that the potential complementarity of these two approaches will gradually come to be appreciated. It is feasible that the Review of Public Administration can offer concrete recommendations to design a system that can effectively draw on the two threads of democracy. Arguably, the current Local Strategy Partnerships are but a pale reflection of a potentially more robust arrangement.
6. Ideally, the Community Foundation would wish to see the principle of subsidiarity being exercised with regard to the development of new structures for local governance. This would, however, clearly have to

be balanced with effective and cost efficient delivery of services. It might be possible to align these considerations through the designation of a smaller number of local government entities, holding greater responsibilities for the delivery of services, and being made up of a combination of elected representatives drawn from both political parties and other sectors. Coherent regional policy positions should be decided at (hopefully) the level of our devolved Assembly, and through Government Departments. Given the application of the principle of subsidiarity it is to be hoped that the set of public administrative functions to be exercised by 'quangos' should be kept to a minimum. Indeed, it is to be hoped that some levels of current administration could not be dispersed with.

7. The Community Foundation however is acutely aware of the importance of a sense of local identity to many communities across Northern Ireland. This we feel should not be ignored but possibly could find a place in effective Community Councils that are currently a feature of the Scottish system. This approach would also offer local roots for participative democracy. It could also be reflected through a new system and be translated at the regional level through a re-configured Civic Forum.
8. Any new system of public administration would also have to take account of current North-South arrangements, and more specifically the INTERREG sponsored initiatives in terms of cross-Border functional developments.
9. Finally, the Community Foundation believes that the range of models for the visualisation of future public administration arrangements contained in the current Review could be usefully added to in order to offer increased options that go beyond the continuum between centralisation and localism.

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