

## **RESPONSE TO REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

### Introduction

The review of Public Administration launched by Ian Pearson MP, Parliamentary under Secretary of State, will have far reaching consequences for everyone in Northern Ireland. The opportunity to take part in the consultation is therefore welcomed.

Council would agree with the aspiration that any revised system of administration should reflect the needs of the people of Northern Ireland for high quality and responsive public services.

Council also believes that local councils have a central role to play in planning and delivery of a wider range of public services within any new form of public administration in Northern Ireland. There is also an expectation from the Council that the 'democratic deficit' in public administration will be addressed by the Review.

To inform this response Council has carried out its own workshop on the Review and has considered academic research and view points from NILGA and SOLACE.

Council would support the view, expressed by NILGA in their own response, for the concept of the 'hub of the wheel' model. This involves a strengthening role for local councils in civic leadership, community planning, co-ordination and scrutiny. There is considerable support in the local government sector for taking back local services which were removed on reorganisation of local government in 1972. Other possible services have also been considered. Precisely what those services could be explored in a separate consultation once the broad principles of a new form of administration are agreed.

Council supports the continuing development of the local government sector through an expansion of its community planning and civic responsibility roles. Community planning is currently fragmented and would benefit from the co-ordination role which councils can offer. This also provides the opportunity to strengthen civic leadership and community involvement.

In addition the power of wellbeing should be conferred on the sector. These parallel changes would allow local councils to develop a broader range of expertise in preparation for an enhanced role, when appropriate.

### Background

It is accepted that since 1972 there has been in place a confused and confusing network of bodies, boards and organisations with different levels of responsibility and accountability for provision or planning of public services. This has caused frustration among local representatives who believe that their input into the planning or direction of local services is ignored. If better public services are to be provided radical realignment of services is needed. These services need to be sufficiently weighty to allow elected representatives to control more of the essential services that are of concern to their constituents.

While accepting that non departmental public bodies have in many instances delivered good public services there is no reason to believe that such services and staff transferred to local government would not be equally or more effective with the added advantage of democratic accountability.

### Evaluation of Models of Public Administration

Five models of public administration are outlined in the Review Document. They range from the 'do nothing' option to a significant transfer of functions to the local government sector. An assessment of each of these has been carried out by Council and it has also considered the work of NILGA and others.

Given the background to the review itself the 'do nothing' model is unacceptable. This would leave unsolved the problems associated with the present inadequate arrangements. These include poor democratic accountability and limited balance of power between Central and Local Government. The principal decisions on local spend would continue to be taken largely over 140 fragmented public bodies.

Model two, the centralised model, involves government departments taking responsibility for in delivery of strategic and operational services. When measured against the desirable characteristics of public administration outlined above Model two would not meet the subsidiarity test, would give limited distribution of power, and would not be responsive to community needs. It would also limit the dynamism of political life at grass roots level.

Model Three, the regional and sub regional administrative structure, would simply increase the power of non departmental public bodies. Council believes that many of these non-elected bodies still remain largely unaccountable and detached from local people and their needs.

Models Four and Five suggest stronger roles for local government. The enhanced local government model would leave most major public services to be administrated by public bodies, but Council would assume a community planning role and could take on responsibility for related infrastructural services. The feeling within Down District Council however is that Model Four does not fulfil all the characteristics detailed in the consultation document, in particular the necessary balance of power between central government and local government could not be provided.

Model Five, strong local government, best fits the characteristics of an effective administration. It provides for strong democratic accountability, as well as the ability to realise economies of scale, efficiency and effectiveness. Potential for integration, balance of power between central and local government and for dynamism of political activity at grass roots level are greatly enhanced.

There are a number of non-departmental public bodies which should continue to operate at a regional level for instance Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

This Model suggests a small number of Councils taking on major functional responsibilities. In so doing it offers the opportunity for high quality public services provided within a democratically accountable framework.

Down District Council would agree that within Model five local identity and involvement must be protected.

Council believe that the essence of local government is providing local services to local people in a local way. This sense of local identity has to be formally recognised within any new arrangements for public administration. Many issues are localised therefore local knowledge and governance are essential prerequisites for balanced development.

### Conclusion

Evidence from the Review Team's October 2002 omnibus survey identifies major dissatisfaction with delivery of public services. In setting out a new form of administration there needs to be a confirmation of the key role for local government in community leadership, community, planning and delivery of efficient and effective public services.

Local government is best placed to assess and respond quickly to the need of local people in an acceptable and sensitive way. Local government therefore has a critical role to play in the provision of a wider range of local services.

The review of public administration should therefore deliver an administrative structure for Northern Ireland which will acknowledge the need not only for efficiency in service delivery but reflect local democratic accountability and local identity. Down District Council therefore believes that Model 5, strong Local Government is the preferred Model for future administration with a recognition that there remains a role for a number of non-departmental public bodies to continue at a Northern Ireland level where they have proven to be effective and are likely to continue to be so in the future.

G M McBride

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