

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