

Research and Library Services



Research Briefing

September 2007

REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Kendrew Colhoun

This briefing outlines the key timetable of the Review of Public Administration, focussing on the models of the structures of local government based on the consultation and research undertaken as part of the RPA.

Library Research Papers are compiled for the benefit of Members of The Assembly and their personal staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

Summary of key points

- The Review of Public Administration was launched in 2002 and aimed to review the existing arrangements for the accountability, administration and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland, and bring forward options for reform.
- The process progressed to a series of final announcements in 2005 and 2006 from Direct Rule Ministers. The November 2005 announcement proposed a seven-Council model
- Following the return of devolution, the Minister of the Environment announced a Review of Local Government which would report in late 2007
- A strand of this review would focus on the number of councils
- This paper identifies key timescales in the RPA and outlines the background research on model structure as carried out through commissioned research and consultations

Introduction

The Review of Public Administration (RPA) was launched by the Northern Ireland Executive in June 2002. Its terms of reference were to:

“review the existing arrangements for the accountability, administration and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland, and to bring forward options for reform which are consistent with the arrangements and principles of the Belfast Agreement, within an appropriate framework of political and financial accountability”.

The RPA had reached a conclusion under Direct Rule Ministers by March 2006 following publication of two reports on the final outcome of the review by the then Secretary of State Peter Hain MP – (a) in November 2005 on the outcomes of local government structures, education, and health & social services; (b) in March 2006 on the remaining public bodies.

The Minister of the Environment Arlene Foster MP is chairing a sub-committee of the Executive Committee which will report to the Executive in autumn 2007 and the public in December 2007¹.

This paper focuses on providing a chronology of events within the RPA, summarizing the outcomes of the consultation exercises and some of the research undertaken to inform RPA decision-making². An additional comprehensive review is available at

Timescales

The timescales for the implementation of the RAP are given at <http://www.rpani.gov.uk/index/update-against-timetable.htm>

Table 1 outlines the chronology of key aspects of the RPA since June 2002.

¹ <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-doe/news-doe-060707-arlenr-foster-announces.htm>

² An additional comprehensive review is available at: <http://assist.assemblyni.gov.uk/services/rsrchlib/research/reports/reportspub/centre/moore0406.pdf>

Table 1. Chronology of key steps in the RPA 2002 – 2007.

Task	Date
RPA launched	June 2002
RPA outcomes I – Structures of Local Government, and Education, Health and Social Services	Nov 2005
RPA outcomes II – other public bodies	Mar 2006
Direction from the Secretary of State to establish a Committee on the Programme for Government	Nov 2006
Meetings of the Subgroup on the Review of Public Administration and Rural Planning	Dec 2006 – Jan 2007

Research and consultation outcomes

Models of local government

The first consultation published in March 2006 focused on the model of public administration rather than the bodies and the Secretary of State described that the document, amongst other things, was setting out a number of broad models for discussion. Recommendations on the ideal model and numbers of organizations were for a further stage of the review.

The five models presented in the consultation document were:

- **Model 1:** The status quo
- **Model 2:** Centralised model which envisaged major services being delivered directly by departments through a network of sub-regional offices by a number of regional and sub-regional public bodies
- **Model 3:** A model in which a major range of services would be delivered by a number of regional and sub-regional public bodies
- **Model 4:** A variation in the status quo which saw an enhanced role for local government
- **Model 5:** A model in which local councils would assume responsibility for delivering virtually all public services at local level

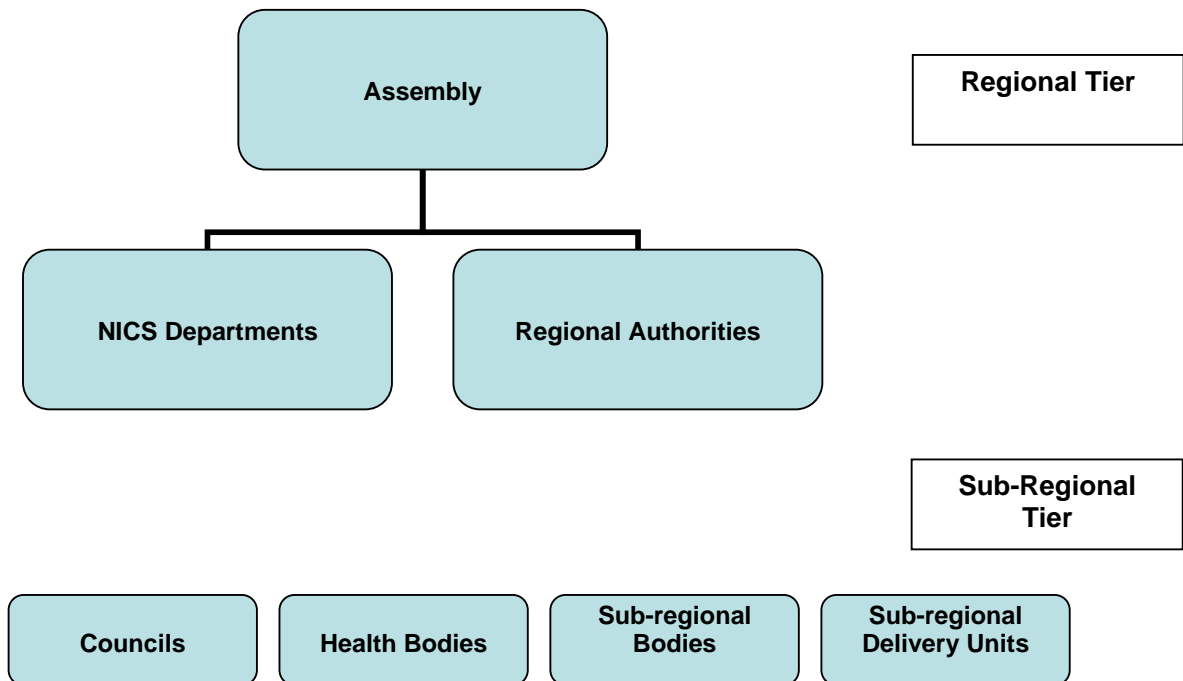
The summary of key themes arising from the 2003 consultation reported that there was a preference for Models 4 and 5, with fewer quangos and fewer, but larger Councils with more powers.

In addition, the summary indicated that:

(a) Co-terminosity is seen as essential to facilitate effective collaboration, (b) that there is a recognition that some services are best delivered centrally but there is scope for more local delivery than at present, and (c) The Assembly, Executive and Departments should be responsible for policy and strategic development, as well as monitoring standards, but not for the delivery of services.

Responses from 24 of 26 local councils were described as expressing a strong preference for Models 4 and 5 also.

The outcomes of the 'further consultation' document was published in March 2005. This proposed a two-tier model of public administration comprising:



The document proposed three options on the number of councils based on configurations of seven, 11 and 15. The document outlined some advantages and disadvantages of the various options as follows:

- 7 council option – most efficient in terms of service delivery and the potential to provide strong local government. Weakness is the dilution of local identities which could be partially offset by each council to comprise civic councils
- 11 council option – less efficient in terms of service delivery but possibly better at preserving local identity
- 15 council option – strongest in terms of preserving local identities but least efficient in terms of economies of scale; the two models examined were based on (a) parliamentary boundaries, and (b) configurations of existing councils

A wide-ranging programme of research was also undertaken in parallel with the consultation exercises. This comprised study visits, altitudinal surveys, focus groups, mapping out the public sector, comparative analysis and briefing papers (a full list of sources is given in Appendix 1).

Study Visits

The RPA team undertook a range of visits (11 countries³) and their summary paper reached the following conclusions:

- No accepted view of the optimal size of Regional or Local Authorities
- In determining the size of a local authority, population, history and geography can be equally relevant. The general patterns in most countries has been towards increasing the size of and reducing the number of local authorities
- The size of an authority impacts on the balance between efficiency and accountability and responsiveness. Different countries have different perspectives on this, and some support an infrastructure of very small local authorities which, while having disadvantages in terms of economy of scale in the delivery of services, is seen as providing essential democratic accountability at local level
- This has also led to differing solutions in relation to arrangements for delivery of services and the scope of the public sector. Many jurisdictions are not constrained to have public services delivered only by employees of the public service and, hence, they can overcome diseconomies of scale by contracting out service provision. Where direct public sector provision is preferred

³ Further details are available at: <http://www.rpani.gov.uk/index/rpa-reviewresearch-decisions/research-old/study-visits.htm>

authorities sometimes pool resources to provide specific services, for example in England, Spain and New Zealand⁴.

Focus Groups

Two key research projects were carried out:

Views on Key Aspects of Proposals for the Review of Public Administration

12 focus groups comprising members of the general public and a further 4 from 'marginalized client groups', reached the conclusion in August 2005 that "there was support for all 3 options (7, 11 or 15) with merits and drawbacks identified for each one"

Views on Public Services – Local Identity

Completed in March 2005 and comprised 24 focus groups across Northern Ireland with 379 members of the general public and 6 specialist focus groups including people with disabilities, from ethnic minorities and of different sexual orientation⁵.

Attitudinal Surveys

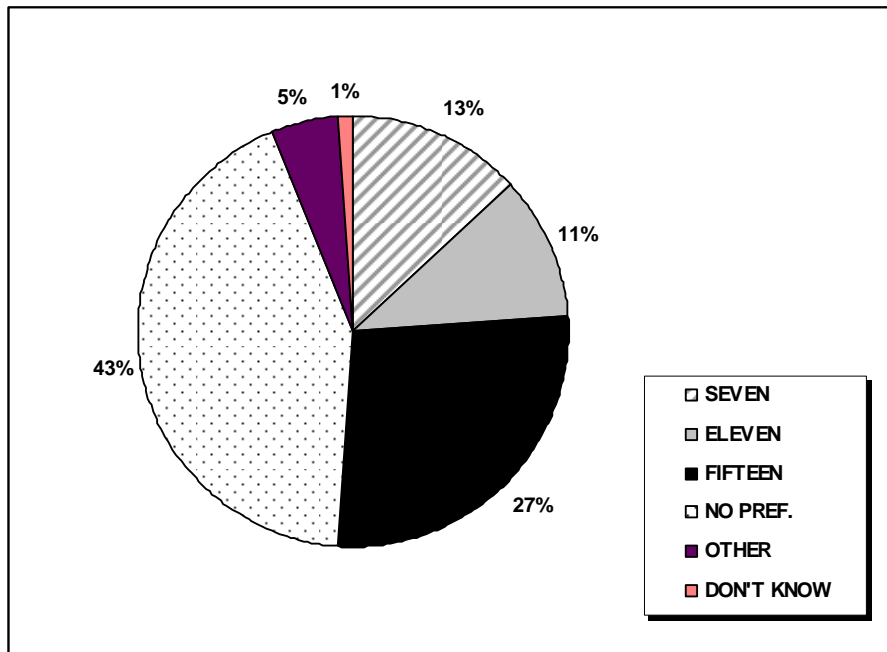
The Report entitled *Research Bulletin 6 Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey* was based on the NI Omnibus Survey and asked respondents to state their preferences in relation to the number of councils as proposed in the RPS Further Consultation document. The results showed that the largest proportion of those for which a numerical preference was expressed favoured a model with 15 councils⁶ (Figure 2).

⁴ Available at: <http://www.rpani.gov.uk/index/rpa-reviewresearch-decisions/research-old/study-visits/main-findings.htm>

⁵ www.rpani.gov.uk/local_identity_research_report.pdf

⁶ www.rpani.gov.uk/research_bulletin_6_-_ni_omnibus_survey_july_2005.pdf

Figure 2. Responses to attitudinal surveys – preference in relation to number of councils. Source: NI Omnibus Survey, www.rpani.gov.uk/research_bulletin_6_-_ni_omnibus_survey_july_2005.pdf



A second report (published in March 2005) focussed on the issue of local identity and reported that half (49%) of respondents stated that their quality of service was more important than the size of the council area⁷.

Rating Research

This research focussed on two areas:

- Impact on and distribution of the Regional rate – focused on domestic properties only and examined the impact of the developing model of public administration on the rating tax base⁸
- Investigation into the relative domestic property wealth base – examined the impact of the regional rate of the RPA scenarios under both the current NAV-based rating system and also the proposed CV system for domestic and NAV for non-domestic properties⁹.

The outcomes were summarized in 2004¹⁰.

⁷ Available at: www.rpani.gov.uk/research_bulletin_5_-_local_identity_omnibus_survey.pdf

⁸ Available at: http://www.rpani.gov.uk/impact_on_and_distribution_of_the_regional_rate.pdf

⁹ Available at:

http://www.rpani.gov.uk/investigation_into_the_relative_domestic_property_wealth_base.pdf

¹⁰ Available at: http://www.rpani.gov.uk/main_research_findings.pdf

Efficiency savings and the costs of implementing the RPA proposals: January 2006

This work aimed to estimate the efficiency savings to be gained from the implementation of the RPA proposals, to identify the steps necessary for implementation and estimate the costs of this.

The optimum model defined in terms of the maximum potential release of efficiency savings as Option 4: 7 councils, 5 health agencies, and one combined educational support body, estimated at a post-implementation efficiency saving of £206 million¹¹.

Briefing Papers

A range of briefing papers were prepared as follows:

- [Checks, balances and safeguards \(PDF 278 KB\)](#)
- [Civic leadership \(PDF 193 KB\)](#)
- [Funding arrangements for local government in the UK jurisdictions and elsewhere \(PDF 193 KB\)](#)
- [Leadership \(PDF 108 KB\)](#)
- [Local government representation \(PDF 109 KB\)](#)
- ['Joining-up' governance \(PDF 201 KB\)](#)
- [Quality of service \(PDF 158 KB\)](#)
- [Partnerships \(PDF 228 KB\)](#)
- [e Government \(PDF 402 KB\)](#)
- [Accountability \(PDF 193 KB\)](#)
- [Roles of semi-state bodies \(PDF 155 KB\)](#)
- [Subsidiary \(PDF 138 KB\)](#)
- [Multi-level governance \(PDF 225 KB\)](#)
- [Public service reform \(PDF 221 KB\)](#)

Final Announcements

In November 2006 the then Secretary of State stated that the seven Council-model was the preferred one following the Review.

A further announcement on the future of Quangos was made in March 2006¹².

The Review of Public Administration – Programme for Government sub-group

Over the period December 2006 – January 2007 the Committee on the Programme for Government sub-group on the Review of Public Administration and Rural Planning met.

¹¹ Available at: www.rpani.gov.uk/deloitte_report_-_costs_and_efficiencies.pdf

¹² *Better Government for Northern Ireland: Final Decisions of the Review of Public Administration*

The Subgroup was unable to reach a consensus position in relation to the number of councils, with three parties (UUP, SDLP and DUP) preferring a fifteen council model, while Sinn Féin supported the 7 (c) option selected by the Secretary of State.

Current position

In July 2007, the Minister for the Environment Arlene Foster announced a review of local government stating that this would have three strands¹³: “The first strand will focus on developing our shared vision for local government. The second will focus on the numbers of councils and the third will concentrate on the functions to transfer to local government. The review will consider the decisions of the previous administration to develop a council-led community planning process and the complementary power of well-being.”

¹³ Available at; <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-doe/news-doe-060707-arlenr-foster-announces.htm>

Appendix 1. Key RPA reports (from www.rpani.gov.uk)

Research Reports

2006

January

[Exercise to estimate the costs and efficiencies of the Review of Public Administration proposals - executive summary \(PDF 50.94 KB\)](#)

2005

November

[Checks, balances and safeguards \(PDF 278.9 KB\)](#)

[Case study analyses for RPA on community planning in operation within the UK and Ireland \(PDF 723.81 KB\)](#)

[Views on key aspects of proposals for the Review of Public Administration \(PDF 1.47 MB\)](#)

[Research bulletin 6 Northern Ireland omnibus survey \(PDF 163.6 KB\)](#)

March

[Local identity \(PDF 1.07 MB\): Findings from focus groups with the general public and structured interviews with elected representatives](#)

[Local identity omnibus survey bulletin \(January '05\) \(PDF 260 KB\)](#)

January

[Rating research](#)

[Identification of new administrative zones using districts as a base \(PDF 3.87 MB\)](#)

2004

December

[Comparative study - Northern Ireland and Scotland \(PDF 887.7 KB\)](#)

[Omnibus survey bulletin \(June '04\) \(PDF 182 KB\)](#)

May

[Public sector staff focus groups \(PDF 1.46 MB\)](#)

2003

December

[Focus group research 2 with general public \(PDF 930 KB\)](#)

[Analysis of attitudinal research \(PDF 332 KB\)](#)

August

[Mapping the public sector](#)

June

[Omnibus survey bulletin \(April '03\) \(PDF 188 KB\)](#)

April

[Omnibus survey bulletin \(February '03\) \(PDF 159 KB\)](#)

[Omnibus survey bulletin \(September '02\) \(PDF 171 KB\)](#)

February

[Structured interviews with key providers and users \(PDF 224 KB\)](#)

[Focus group research with general public \(PDF 1.15 MB\)](#)

BRIEFING PAPERS

- [Checks, balances and safeguards \(PDF 278 KB\)](#)
- [Civic leadership \(PDF 193 KB\)](#)
- [Funding arrangements for local government in the UK jurisdictions and elsewhere \(PDF 193 KB\)](#)
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- [Public service reform \(PDF 221 KB\)](#)

STUDY VISITS

- [Main findings](#)
- [Australia](#)
- [Belgium and Flanders](#)
- [Finland](#)
- [Germany](#)
- [Ireland](#)
- [Michigan](#)
- [Ontario](#)
- [Netherlands](#)
- [New Zealand](#)
- [Spain](#)
- [Sweden](#)