

The Review of Public Administration

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In P. Carmichael, C.Knox and R. Osborne (eds) *Devolution and Constitutional Change*. Manchester University Press, 2007: 201-218

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Minister of State, Lord Rooker, recently announced ‘there is too much bureaucracy and red-tape in all elements of public administration in Northern Ireland, which costs a lot of money’ (Rooker, 2005:1). Such a charge could have been levelled at any part of the United Kingdom, but for Northern Ireland, ministerial attention to public services as opposed to constitutional and security issues has been unusual. In turn, the Minister claimed that by early 2006 he hoped to announce a much more streamlined and co-ordinated system for the delivery of public services which would free-up money for front-line services in hospitals and schools. The structure of public administration in the Province has emerged piecemeal and parts of it, conceived as a short-term palliative (described by Bloomfield (1998) as a state of ‘permanent impermanence’), remained untouched from 1973 as more pressing political issues took centre stage. With the advent of a political ‘settlement’ in the form of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998 and associated devolved government, attention turned to how public services were organised and delivered.

As the outcomes of the Review of Public Administration emerge, this chapter attempts three things. First, we consider the detail of the review process – its inception, aims and consultation processes. Second, we describe the existing system of public administration and examine the responses of the main sectors, local government, non-departmental public bodies, and government agencies to proposals

for change. Third, we set out the outcomes of the review and the likely consequences for public service delivery in Northern Ireland.

The Review - Origins and Aims

The Review of Public Administration was launched in June 2002 and had its origins in the *Programme for Government* in which the (then) Executive pledged 'to lead the most effective and accountable form of government in Northern Ireland'. The prevailing argument is that Northern Ireland has moved from a position of 'democratic deficit' to surfeit mode with 18 Westminster MPs, 108 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), 582 councillors and 3 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), all for a population of 1.7m people. Aside from considerations of political representation, the focus is now on ways to rationalise public service provision as the Assembly (in suspension for the fourth time²) struggles, without the benefit of tax-raising powers, to meet the seemingly insatiable demands for public service provision.

The terms of reference for the Review of Public Administration reflect the need to restructure the administrative architecture within a devolved system of government as follows:

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 (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005:138).

The importance of this exercise was best described by the (then) First Minister who argued that 'it is one of the major tasks facing the Executive and will be central to the way in which we deliver, structure and organise our public services in the future' (Trimble, 2002). In general the announcement of the Review was welcomed by local politicians, many of whom have been frustrated in their role as local councillors by what they perceive as unaccountable public officials operating under Direct Rule circumstances.

The scope of the Review has however attracted criticism in that its terms of reference exclude the 11 government departments established by the Belfast Agreement. The official position is that while it is likely to have implications for the *functions* exercised by the Executive, the *institutions* and the divisions of functions between the departments has not been part of the Review's remit although this is rather difficult to comprehend in practice. For example, if functions such as roads and water were removed from the Department for Regional Development and relocated elsewhere, it is highly unlikely that retaining this department could be justified. The inclusion of government departments was rejected on the grounds that the Review should not be used as a way of renegotiating the Agreement 'by the back door'. The rationale was simple, albeit bizarre, from a purely administrative perspective: with devolution so precarious (and so it has proved to be), nothing could be allowed that might endanger its fragile continuance.

The Review is being led by a multi-disciplinary team of officials in the Office of the Minister and Deputy First Minister, working with the advice of a team of independent experts. Some initial concerns were expressed that a Review, led by civil servants, amounted to regulatory capture by officials who would have an inherent resistance to radical changes. Characterising civil servants as 'budget maximising

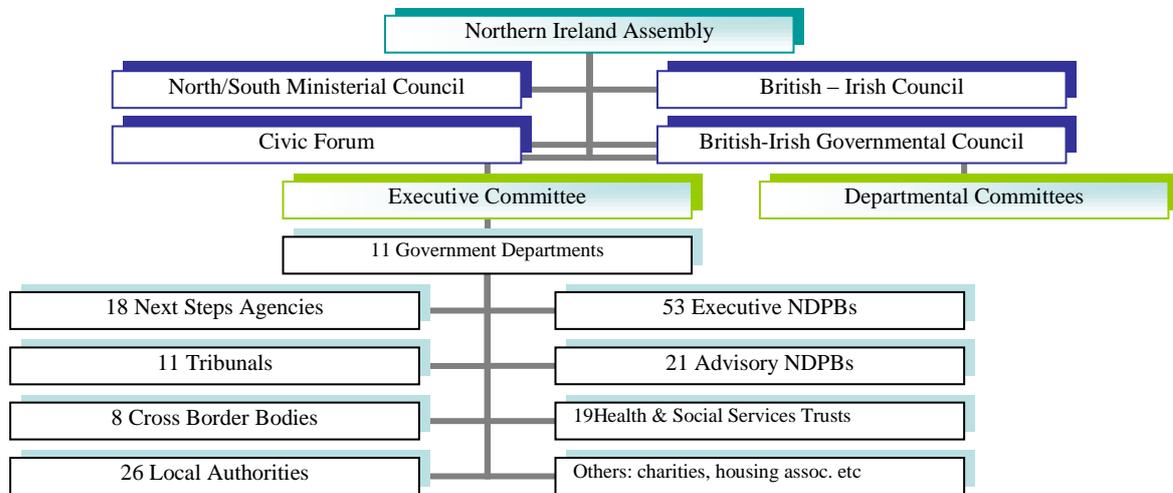
bureaucrats' (Dunleavy, 1991), one Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), in a rhetorical question, remarked 'officials will have a vested interest in keeping their own administrative empires going - who has ever heard of a civil servant who has been anxious to reduce the number beneath him (*sic*) in the pyramid?' (McCartney, 2002)

The Existing System of Public Administration

The current administrative system in Northern Ireland is a complex mosaic of bodies which have evolved in response to political circumstances since the early 1970s.

These arrangements include 26 local councils with limited functional responsibilities, 11 government departments, 18 (Next Steps) Executive Agencies, a plethora of non-departmental public bodies (quangos) amongst which are 5 education and library boards, 4 health and social services boards and 19 associated trusts, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (see figure 14.1). Overall the Northern Ireland public sector employs over 200,000 people (including 31,000 in the civil service; 68,000 in the health service; 50,000 in education and 10,000 in local government). The assorted administrative geometry has not only created confusion in the minds of the public as to who is responsible for what service, but also led to accusations that Northern Ireland is over-administered. Importantly, however, there is much criticism about the accountable nature of the system of public administration, not least because of the selected 'quangocrats' who oversee many of the key public services (eg. health, education and housing). These areas also absorb the largest budget allocations with health and personal social services accounting for around 44% of expenditure on devolved public services, and education and libraries amounting to 24%, from an overall expenditure of some £7.3 billion (Department of Finance and Personnel, 2005).

Figure 14.1: The Northern Ireland Public Sector



One example is cited by the (then) First Minister to illustrate the administrative maze:

If one considers people who live in the Cookstown District Council area. They are in the Southern Education and Library Board area, the Northern Health and Social Services area, the western area for roads and planning, and the eastern area for water. It would be scarcely surprising if people were confused about who delivers their services (Trimble, 2002:402).

The public sector has also remained largely insulated from the wider UK modernising agenda but for the odd read-across reform such as ‘Next Steps’ Agencies where, as an after-thought, the Northern Ireland Civil Service was encouraged to follow the Home Civil Service (Knox & McHugh, 1990 and Carmichael, 2002). More recently the civil service has approved a reform strategy (*Fit for Purpose*) aimed at: prioritising front

line services; building capacity; and embracing diversity (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2004). Such is the disjointed nature of the Northern Ireland public sector, however, that the Comptroller and Auditor General described it as 'disastrously fragmented'. Almost every body in Great Britain that carries out any function of government, he argued, 'is duplicated on a tiny scale within Northern Ireland and that is an impediment to clarity and an enormous inefficiency' (Dowdall, 2004).

The Review of Public Administration

The original timetable for the Review of Public Administration envisaged an interim report in Spring 2003 and final recommendations by the end of that year. This has slipped considerably. The Review Team published its first consultation document in October 2003, further consultation paper in March 2005, and the outcomes were announced on 22nd November 2005. The review covers over 140 organisations within the public sector: 18 government agencies; 26 district councils; and 99 public bodies comprising 2,065 public appointees (Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005). The purpose of the first consultation paper was to 'bring forward a number of important issues which influence how, and by whom, services might be provided, and to set out for discussion a number of broad models of public administration' (Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2003: 3).

The consultation document outlined 5 possible models for consideration in rethinking the structural architecture of public services. These are summarised as follows:

- *Status Quo*: This model envisages no change to the overall structure of public administration.
- *Centralised*: Under this model all major services would be delivered directly by government departments.
- *Regional and Sub-Regional Public Bodies*: A range of public bodies, operating either regionally or sub-regionally, would deliver public services.
- *Reformed Status Quo with enhanced Local Government*: While keeping the main features of the current system, local government would be given new responsibilities.
- *Strong Local Government*: Major public services would be the responsibility of a smaller number of new councils.

The consultation period closed in February 2004 and 174 responses were received. The key messages from respondents were that:

- There was almost unanimous support for the need for change and a widespread demand for early action.
- Quality of public services was seen as the most important characteristic against which any new system should be measured.
- There was widespread consensus on the need for fewer public bodies, with more collaboration and less fragmentation.
- Of the five high-level models, there was a preference for either enhanced or strong local government, with fewer quangos (Pearson, 2004a).

The review team used the feedback from the first consultation paper to engage with local political parties in the absence of a return to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The (then) Northern Ireland Office Minister, Ian Pearson, pre-empted the launch of a second consultation paper by announcing his own views on the final reform model:

I envisage the Assembly with departments sitting at regional level with responsibility for policy, strategic planning, setting standards and monitoring performance. At local level, larger more powerful councils could have responsibilities for an increased range of functions... I will also be examining the scope for significant reductions in the number of public bodies, in particular, the administrative structures around health and education (Pearson, 2004b: 1).

Former Minister Pearson called for the formation of between 5 to 8 local councils to replace the existing 26 local authorities. The political backlash came swiftly. Local councillors viewed this proposal as an attack on local democracy and a portent that further consultation would be a facade. Minister Pearson sought a compromise and assured local politicians that his mind was not yet made up.

The review team published a final consultation document *The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: Further Consultation* in March 2005 (Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005) in which the Direct Rule Minister heralded the proposals as a 'further important step in creating a modern, citizen-centred, high quality system of public administration' where 'improving the quality of public services lies at the heart of any new model' (Pearson, 2005: 1). The

final consultation based reforms on a two tier model of public administration. The first tier would be a regional tier encompassing the Assembly, government departments, and regional authorities, the focus of which would be policy development, setting standards and delivering regional services. The second tier, a sub-regional tier, would encompass organisations that ideally operate within common boundaries to include councils, health bodies, sub-regional bodies and delivery units of regional bodies. The model assumed delivery at the sub-regional tier unless economies of scale (or other factors) dictated delivery on a regional basis (see figure 14.2).

TWO-TIER MODEL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

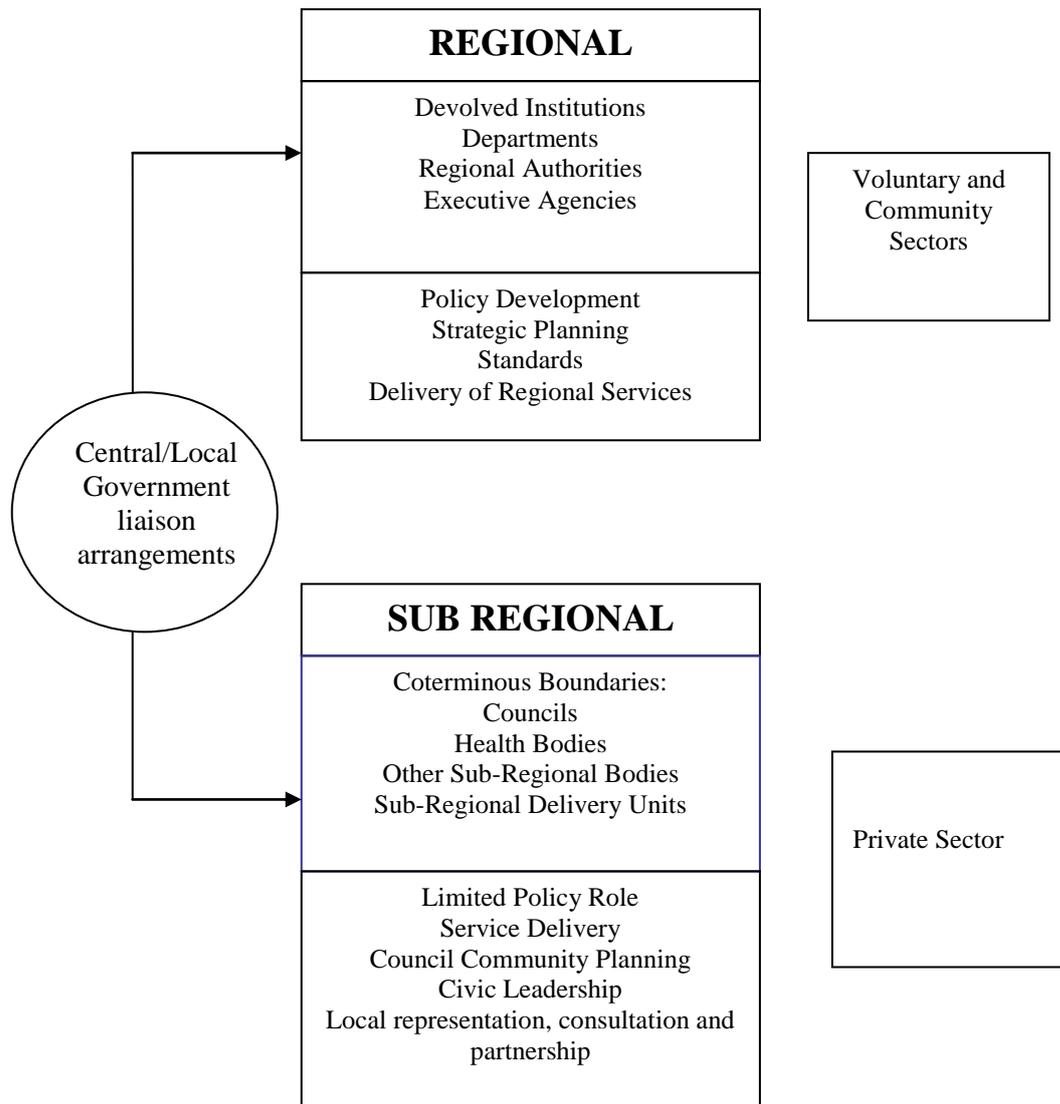


Figure 14.2: Source Review of Public Administration
(Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005:22)

In terms of specific sectors, three options were proposed for local government based on configurations of 7, 11 and 15 councils. These options were as a direct result of political compromise between the minister and political parties. The minister and the review team favoured seven councils as ‘optimal for service delivery purposes’. This would result in local councils with populations of between 165, 000 and 390,000.

The seven council 'solution' would allow for common boundaries with regional/sub-regional services. The 15 council option originated from local politicians as a reaction to what they perceived as the minister's attempt to radically cut the number of district councils. This option was based on the current 18 Westminster constituencies (with one for Belfast's 4 constituencies). Civic councils³ are proposed for the 7 council model to preserve local identity, are optional in the 11 council model, and are considered unnecessary for 15 councils. Their suggested role is to 'consult locally, to form partnerships and to gather local views to feed into the main council's deliberations and to undertake assigned responsibilities on its behalf' (Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005:40:4.33).

In the health sector, the review team recommends the replacement of the four existing health and social services boards and 18 of the 19 Trusts (the Ambulance Trust would remain) with either five or seven sub-regional health agencies. The reviewers favour five agencies which would allow for a full range of health services (including acute hospital services), but to benefit from co-terminous boundaries, if seven councils were agreed, they would move to seven health agencies. In addition, the existing six regional health bodies⁴ would be reduced to four, and a regional forum established to advise on the development of regional services and the work of agencies. The current four health and social services councils that represent the views of consumers would be replaced by one regional body.

In education, the Department of Education would continue to be responsible for the development and implementation of education policy and strategy, monitoring standards and allocation of resources. The functions in support of education (recruitment, employment and payment of teachers, school library service, transport, admissions, raising standards) would be brought together in a new education services

body replacing the five existing education and library boards, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (Irish medium schools body), Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and the Education Staff Commission. A second new education body would be formed to bring together existing professional support services (curriculum development, examinations and assessment, in-service training, procurement of support services).

The review team also considered 150 quangos and executive agencies. In terms of quangos, two options are on offer. The first is that non-departmental public bodies should be abolished and their functions transferred to central or local government, the voluntary and community sectors or the private sector. The second option, favoured by the reviewers, is that public bodies should continue to exist but every effort should be made to improve their accountability. This would involve a review of all quangos, a reduction in their number and increased accountability arrangements. In terms of executive agencies, the reviewers concluded that in the absence of strong views expressed on their future, decisions should be left to a returning Executive and Assembly.

Sectoral Responses to the Consultation

Local Government

The proposals emerging in the second consultation document are predicated on strong local government, or as the Review of Public Administration (RPA) described it, ‘local government will have a pivotal role in the two-tier model’ (Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005: 29). The response from the local government sector, however, has been one of scepticism. They were unwilling to believe that the Minister is approaching the

review with an open mind. Former Minister Ian Pearson had already made his preference clear for between 5 – 8 larger more powerful councils and Lord Rooker, influenced by Secretary of State Peter Hain's views on Wales (with 22 unitary councils for almost twice the population of Northern Ireland), was said to back the 7 council model. Many local authorities, in a bid to preserve their own areas, have endorsed the 15 councils model but with enhanced powers.

Much of what is proposed in the RPA consultation document is predicated on what might be described as a 'sizeism' principle (Stewart, 2003: 43), that large-scale local government is both efficient and effective. In considering its own options of 7, 11 or 15 councils, the Review Team make the case for seven councils based on amalgamations of existing councils as the 'optimal for service delivery'.

The RPA's arguments for its optimal solution are as follows:

- It would undoubtedly provide for strong local government.
- Councils would be large, serving populations ranging from 165,000 – 390,000.
- All major service providers would operate to common boundaries (full 1:1 co-terminosity), thereby providing strong collaboration for community planning and co-ordination of services.
- Councils would be broadly similar in size, and each would be large enough to deal on equal terms with other service providers, and to advocate to central government.
- The model also offers opportunities to deliver on an enhanced range of functions at a scale that would be the most efficient option (Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005: 40, 4.32).

The claim that it ‘would undoubtedly provide for strong local government’ is not, however, borne out by the experience of reorganisation in Great Britain. In fact, the assumption that size is associated with efficiency and/or effectiveness is far from proven. Travers *et al* (cited in Stewart, 2003) examined evidence from Britain and overseas and concluded:

It does not appear possible to argue a conclusive case for a strong and one-directional link between population size and efficiency and effectiveness... It is not possible to say larger authorities perform, on the whole better than smaller, or smaller authorities better than larger (Travers, T., Jones, G. and Burnham, J. 1993: 4).

This should give the RPA team pause for thought. In the same vein, the move to unitary councils in Great Britain is described by Stewart (2003) as a period of wasted years. He explained how new councils were an amalgamation of previous authorities often lacking any sense of shared identity (prophetic words for Northern Ireland). The reorganisation of local government in Great Britain in the 1990s, he claimed, increased the differences between the structure of government in the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe – ‘many new councils appeared superficial, bringing together in a single authority, towns that in most countries in Europe would be authorities in their own right’ (Stewart, 2003: 181).

The case made by the RPA Team for large single tier local authorities is simply not grounded in experience elsewhere. Stewart makes this point most succinctly:

Almost without exception there are two tiers of local government in European countries. In larger countries there are three tiers of sub-national government. The reason for the tiers is simple. Both the sense of community and the requirements of services are multileveled and do not fit a single tier... A two-tier system allowed different services to be delivered at different levels. The sense of community could be both local and multileveled (Stewart, 2003 184-85).

Not only is the RPA team opposed to the two-tier system of local government, but its proposals for civic councils, as set out, envisage them as having little more than a consultative, advocacy and civic leadership role. They will be given no functional responsibilities it appears; talking shops under any other name.

The proposals for local government in the RPA paper have several key weaknesses:

- They are predicated on the ‘big is beautiful (efficient and effective)’ assertion which has been discredited in other parts of the United Kingdom.
- The Local Government Commission for England estimated that in most cases, unitary authorities would have a population of 150,000 to 250,000 (Local Government Commission for England, 1993). In Northern Ireland, the optimal model recommended by the RPA Team (option 7c) shows 7 councils ranging in size from 188,000 to 277,000. Yet the functional responsibilities proposed by the RPA fall far short of unitary council status in the rest of the United Kingdom, with the absence of housing, education and social services to name the most obvious.

- The proposals for civic councils, in their current format, are an attenuated form of local government amounting to little more than a consultative forum.

In short, the RPA Team proposes to replace the existing 26 district councils and replace them with a smaller number of single tier councils having a marginal increase in functions, and increased representational levels, resulting in a much more remote and disconnected tier of governance. Local authorities, in turn, driven by the limited and rather cautious aspirations of political parties have been reluctant to push for wholesale return of functions to councils, in part a legacy of the former abuse of power and an unwillingness by councillors to place themselves in the front line of functions such as public housing. Whilst new powers of community planning and ‘well-being’ have been widely welcomed by the sector, councils are worried that their proposed role as developing and co-ordinating local policy on service delivery between the major service providers within their boundaries will prove problematic in practice. With the limited increase in powers envisaged, the council will be seen as a minor stakeholder at the community planning table and hence their ability to hold others to account restricted. Moreover, in the minds of the electorate a community planning role may confer on councils a responsibility for those services over which they have no direct control, but for which voters will hold them accountable.

Quangos

Although starting out with a remit to consider almost 150 non-departmental public bodies, substantive proposals for change in the health and education sectors which are replete with quangos reduced the effective examination to what the RPA describe as 79 ‘significant public bodies’ including agencies⁵ (Office of First Minister and

Deputy First Minister, 2005: 95: 7.3). The RPA's preferred approach that public bodies should continue to exist but every effort be made to improve their accountability met with a mixed response. The RPA suggestion that all public bodies should be reviewed also attracted criticism in that the long awaited proposals for change was recommending yet another review. The prevalent view, typically expressed by the local government umbrella body Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), was that 'there should be a presumption that the maximum number of powers exercised by unelected bodies should be returned to local government or the Assembly' (Northern Ireland Local Government Association, 2005: 15). Where there was decision made to retain a public body, they argued, then clear lines of accountability to local government or the Assembly should be established in legislation.

The existence of quangos can be justified on at least two broad grounds:

- Government may need bodies from which it can distance itself in sensitive areas;
- There is value in having temporary organisations outside the permanent service that can be scrapped when the need for such temporary arrangements no longer exists (Hood, 1981).

In the case of the former, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is a good example, and the latter, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (an organisation typically characterised as 'permanently impermanent', set up as a temporary political expedient but still in existence). Although the changed political environment has challenged the rationale for so many arms-length bodies, their

integration into the public sector will prove more difficult than local politicians first envisaged. Exceptions or opt-outs quickly emerge. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is a case in point. Its submission to the RPA notes ‘the Housing Executive believes the current arrangements represent the best option for the delivery of housing services in Northern Ireland’ (Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2005: 2).

Other ‘candidates’ for abolition/integration make a similar case. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board, for example, argues that there is a continuing need for it to exist as a strategic leader at a national level and ‘this role needs to be at arms length from central government and with a strong private sector interface’ (Northern Ireland Tourist Board, 2005: 1). The Arts Council of Northern Ireland claims that ‘as efforts to build peace continue, now more than ever, there is a need for a measured independent, regional perspective’ and make the case that they be retained ‘as an independent but fully accountable, dynamic agency’ (Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2005: 1 & 3). In the same vein the Sports Council for Northern Ireland argues for the *status quo* with ‘some increased political representation as the preferred option for the future development of sport’ (Sports Council for Northern Ireland, 2005: 5). Special pleading and the RPA’s own predisposition for retention with increased accountability may lead to little more than a few trivial quangos being offered up as sacrificial lambs (e.g. Fisheries Conservancy Board, Pig Production Development Committee) but, in practice, amounting to little more than tinkering at the margins.

Agencies

The third area of the Review’s remit is Executive Agencies. Importantly, these bodies come closest to an examination of central government departments, within which they

reside. Perhaps surprisingly, none of the 18 agencies responded to either of the major consultation papers. This can be interpreted in two ways. First, there is widespread apathy amongst Executive Agencies to any changes which may take place, or second, that they are confident in the knowledge that the RPA will have limited direct impact on them. More controversially, it could be suggested that RPA civil servants are reluctant (under tacit pressure from Permanent Secretaries) to recommend changes which would have obvious consequences for government departments. The RPA final consultation document, supported by the fact that there were few responses on the future role and function of agencies in the first consultation, rather feebly suggests that 'decisions on the future of Executive Agencies should best be left to a returning Executive and Assembly' (Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005: 100: 7.16).

The lack of attention to the detail of these bodies, some of which are major spenders, is difficult to explain. In other words, the organisations which the review of public administration has paid least attention have been those most severely criticised for the management and stewardship of public funds. The Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland (C&AG), for example, was unable to form an opinion on the financial statement of the Department for Social Development (in which the Social Security Agency and Child Support Agency reside) for two consecutive years (2001 - 03). The Social Security Agency had estimated losses of £121 million in Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Housing Benefit as a result of errors by officials and customers, and fraudulent benefits claims. These services have been qualified by auditors and reported on for a number of years. The C&AG similarly qualified his opinion on the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency for the ninth consecutive year due to overpayments of maintenance

by non-resident parents, and inaccurate assessments of maintenance which led to significant errors in amounts owed to non-resident parents (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2004). As one member of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee put it: 'every time we examine anything in Northern Ireland, it always seems to be shockingly lax' (Davidson, 2004: Q35). Deferring consideration of agencies until the restoration of devolution is inexplicable, although the RPA argues that seven Executive Agencies are the subject of change under other initiatives.

The Outcomes

The outcomes of the RPA were announced by Secretary of State Peter Hain on 22nd November 2005 and are summarised as follows:

Local Government:

- 26 district councils are to be reduced to 7 with new functional or additional responsibilities in planning, roads, physical regeneration and local economic development.
- New councils are to be given a statutory duty to develop and co-ordinate the delivery of community planning and the complementary power of well-being.
- The 7 council boundaries (to be decided by a Local Government Boundary Commissioner) will be co-terminous with other service providers (see figure 14.3).
- Safeguards or checks and balances are to be agreed with political parties to protect minorities against domination by the majority party.
- A reduction in the number of councillors from 582 to a maximum of 50 councillors per council (350 in total) and the abolition of the dual mandate (councillors and Members of the Legislative Assembly).

Figure 14.3: Possible Boundaries for 7 new Councils



Health:

Core structures in health services will reduce from 47 organisations to 18. The plans include:

- A considerably smaller government department (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety).
- A Strategic Health and Social Services Authority to replace the 4 Boards and take on functions currently with the Department.
- Eighteen Trusts reduced to five by April 2007 (the Ambulance Service remains as a separate Trust).
- Seven local commissioning bodies, demand led by patients and driven by GPs and primary care professionals, taking on some roles from the four Boards and some roles from the 15 Local Health and Social Care Groups, which will be abolished.

- One Patient and Client Council replacing the existing 4 Health and Social Services Councils.

Education:

- A new Education Authority will bring together all the direct support functions currently undertaken by the Education and Library Boards and the range of other organisations funded by Government (the Councils for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Regional Training Unit (RTU).
- The new Education Authority will also have responsibility for front-line support and related functions currently undertaken by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG).
- The role of Boards of Governors will continue much as at present.
- A new Education Advisory Forum will be established to act as a unified advisory interface between the Department and the education sector.
- Youth services will remain under the control of the Department of Education and functions of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland will transfer to the education authority.
- The Department of Education will focus more on strategy, policy development and on translation of policy into improved outcomes at the front line.

Quangos:

- An announcement on quangos is not expected until the end of March 2006 but the expectation is to include the transfer of further functions to local government.

Conclusions

The Review of Public Administration has been long in its gestation. Almost 3½ years after its launch, the outcomes at the time of writing (November, 2005) have just been revealed. The Northern Ireland Assembly has been in suspension for over 3 years and its direct involvement in the review lasted little more than 3 months beyond its launch. Despite the magnitude of the task and its long term consequences for public services in Northern Ireland, local politicians will have little influence on the outcomes announced by the Secretary of State, given the unlikelihood of restoring devolution in the short-term. Direct Rule ministers have made it clear both by their actions and words that their tenure in Northern Ireland is not to ‘mind the shop’. Local politicians revert to playing the politics of opposition. Hence the DUP has accused British ministers of shifting the Republic’s borders to include nationalist councils likely to dominate in the west of the Province. The SDLP complain of the total absence of local representation in super councils and the Alliance Party reject the changes because they make little sense for either major services like health or for local accountability. Sinn Féin, on the other hand, the only party supporting the move to seven councils, is stressing the need to protect equality and diversity under the new arrangements – where key decisions will be taken on a cross-community basis.

The review’s claims that public administration reforms are based on ‘strong local government’ have been met with disbelief. The powers offered by the RPA in the outcome of the review amount to little more than a marginal increase in their existing emasculated powers. Lord Rooker claimed the budgets of councils would double (from 4% to 8% of public expenditure). The RPA team, in turn, claims that the only constraint to devolving greater powers was the unwillingness of the local government sector to bid for them. Political parties have been too conservative and

cautious in their demands, a legacy of past sectarian experiences in local government for some and, for others, a narrow and parochial view of the sector and its ability to deliver key functions. Although the changes announced in health and education will remove or integrate many of the existing non-departmental public bodies within these two functional areas, there remains a reluctance to abolish others. The RPA favours strengthening accountability and the retention of the larger quangos such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Invest Northern Ireland (with budgets of £545m and £150m respectively). Government agencies meanwhile have escaped even cursory scrutiny by the RPA so close are they to the fiefdoms of permanent secretaries who are unwilling to see their departments examined by the review. This is a serious omission given the independent criticism which agencies have attracted in the delivery of their services. Interestingly, however, in announcing the reforms, the Secretary of State recognised that the RPA changes would have a significant impact on departmental structures and he intends to discuss this issue with all the political parties in Northern Ireland (Hain, 2005).

Undoubtedly the RPA will rationalise structures within the public sector in Northern Ireland. Whether this will lead to savings in administrative costs (estimated by the RPA at £200m) and result in improvements in service quality, both key claims of the RPA, is uncertain. Rationalised structures in themselves will not improve quality of provision and as 'savings' will be redirected to front-line services, tracking these could prove difficult. As the outcomes of the review unfold, local politicians remain observers to the most fundamental changes to the public sector in Northern Ireland for over 30 years.

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Notes

¹ Acknowledgements: The authors are grateful for the financial support received from the Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme of the Economic and Social Research Council (Award number L219252108).

² There have been 4 periods of devolution in Northern Ireland since the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement: 2nd December 1999 - 11th February 2000; 30th May 2000 - 10th August 2001; 12th August 2001 - 21st September 2001; and 23rd September 2001 - 14th October 2002.

³ Civic councils are not proposed as a 'lower tier' of local government. The Review Team is keen to avoid the criticism that they replaced a unitary system of local government with a two-tier system.

⁴ The main regional service delivery bodies include: the Central Services Agency; the Health Promotion Agency; the Blood Transfusion Agency; the Medical Physics Agency; the Guardian Ad Litem Agency; and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service.

⁵ The 79 significant public bodies were made up of 34 executive public bodies; 16 advisory public bodies; 11 tribunals and 18 'next steps' agencies.