

Written Ministerial Statements

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ENVIRONMENT

Future of the Local Government Staff Commission

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Mr S Wilson: On 31 March 2008, my predecessor as Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster MLA, made a statement to the Assembly outlining the Executive's decisions on the future shape of local government in Northern Ireland. In this statement, she made a commitment to review the Local Government Staff Commission (the Staff Commission) to ensure that it was resourced appropriately to continue to provide much needed support during the implementation of the decisions on the future shape of local government.

Mr John Hunter, a retired Permanent Secretary from the Department of Finance and Personnel, was appointed to undertake the review. His terms of reference were:

- i. to review the functions of the Staff Commission, as laid down in the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, and to decide whether and to what extent those functions are appropriate to provide the level of support required to give effect to the implementation of the decisions of the Northern Ireland Executive on 13 March 2008 about the future shape of local government in Northern Ireland;
- ii. to consider any changes required to the resources of the Staff Commission; and
- iii. to provide a report by 31 October 2008 outlining options, drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

I received Mr Hunter's report in January 2009 and issued the report to stakeholders.

Specifically, I asked the Policy Development Panel with responsibility for local government structural reform issues, responsible to the Strategic Leadership Board, to consider the report's recommendations and report by the end of April 2009.

At the same time, the Staff Commission was asked to examine and comment upon the recommendations.

Comments on the report were received from the Staff Commission; the Policy Development Panel (enclosing comments from the Northern Ireland Joint Council for Local Government Services); the Public Service Commission and SOLACE NI.

I have given careful consideration to both the report and the responses received. Mr Hunter's recommendations, followed by my decisions on the way forward, are outlined in this statement.

Mr Hunter recommended that the Policy Development Panel "should draw on the experience of the Local Government Staff Commission and consider the creation of an organisation to provide regional support services to the new Councils."

A consultancy exercise is currently underway which is intended to provide the Policy Development Panel with sufficient information to enable recommendations on the organisational structure of the 11 new councils. As part of its deliberations, the Panel will consider what functions could be best delivered at a regional level, as well as potential delivery mechanisms. I will give consideration to the Panel's recommendations, when they are put to the Strategic Leadership Board in due course.

It was further recommended that the Local Government Training Group and its elected members sub-group should make early arrangements for the delivery over the next two years of comprehensive training and development programmes to build capacity in both officers and elected members.

This issue is being considered by the Policy Development Panel with responsibility for local government structural reform issues. To this end, I understand that the Panel is likely to propose that a joint delivery mechanism, comprised of a strategic partnership between the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and the Staff Commission's Local Government Training Group, will be established to take a lead role in overseeing the delivery of a capacity building implementation programme for both elected members and officers in the run up to 2011 and beyond. I expect that proposal to come to the Strategic Leadership Board for discussion and agreement in July.

Mr Hunter recommended that the Staff Commission should continue with its current resource base, with any new pressures being critically appraised and met on an ad hoc basis.

The Staff Commission will continue with its existing resources, but will have the opportunity to bid for additional funding from my Department if required.

The report also recommended that new legislation should extend the role of the Staff Commission to cover the new Transition Committees, when they are established by statute.

The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill will include provisions to establish statutory Transition Committees to implement the local government reform programme. In bringing forward regulations in relation to the composition, governance and functions of the statutory Transition Committees, the role of the Staff Commission will be formally extended to provide support to these Committees on staffing matters. This extension will also cover the full range of functions and duties of the Staff Commission and its role in relation to the appointment and qualifications of officers of councils.

Mr Hunter recommended that the Staff Commission should service new negotiating machinery established specifically to negotiate the implementation of the local government reorganisation.

The Staff Commission has been asked formally to establish and service the Local Government Reform Joint Forum, which will facilitate consultation and negotiation between employer and employee representatives on Human Resources issues during the reorganisation of local government.

Finally, Mr Hunter recommended that the Staff Commission should:

- complete its work on updating its Code of Practice on Recruitment and Selection;
- support the 11 Transition Committees in the appointment of new Clerks and senior staff;
- provide early guidance on vacancy control procedures;
- develop model staff transfer schemes;
- generally assist with the implementation of the Public Service Commission's ten Guiding Principles as they apply to local government; and
- generally support the work of the Strategic Leadership Board, the Regional Transitional Co-ordinating Group, the Policy Development Panels and the 11 Transition Committees.

The Staff Commission will continue to fulfil its current remit. It will also complete, in its role of supporting the Local Government Reform Joint Forum, work on updating its Code of Practice on Recruitment and Selection, provide guidance on

vacancy control procedures and develop a staff transfer scheme.

The Staff Commission will also continue to provide general support to the work of the local government reform implementation structures, particularly the Regional Transition Co-ordinating Group and the Policy Development Panels.

The Staff Commission will play a key role in ensuring that the ten Public Service Commission Guiding Principles as accepted by the Executive are applied fully in respect of all affected staff in local government.

The Executive has given its support to the Public Service Commission in its role in making 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 the decisions on the Review of Public Administration.

Government has circulated the Guiding Principles to all RPA-affected employers and has prepared accompanying Codes of Practice and Guidance Notes to give practical advice to those who will manage the implementation of the changes.

My predecessor, Arlene Foster, gave a commitment that the Guiding Principles would be central to the approach to all human resource issues that arise during the implementation of local government reform. I reaffirm this commitment. The Staff Commission will play a key role in monitoring compliance with these Guiding Principles throughout the reform process.

As Minister Foster indicated in her statement to the Assembly on 31 March 2008, the Executive will review the family of functions to be delivered by local government 12 months after the new councils become operational and periodically thereafter. As I have already indicated in my response to a Written Assembly Question (AQW/6234/2009), the Staff Commission will continue to exist until 2012 and its future will be considered as part of that review.

All those involved in the work on local government reform will be aware that there are many challenges ahead. There is much to be done between now and May 2011. The Staff Commission plays an important role in working with others to give effect to the Executive's decisions on the future shape of local government and this will continue throughout the transition period.

The Staff Commission has a wealth of experience and expertise that will help us to deal with the many and varied complex Human Resources issues arising throughout the reform process. There has been much good work so far, and I would take this opportunity to thank the Staff Commission for the key role they have

played in the process to date. I look forward to continuing to work with all those involved in local government reform and to building on existing partnerships to ensure that the Guiding Principles are applied fully and consistently throughout the reform process.