

SOUTHERN HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES COUNCIL

Response to

REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION



February 2004

REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Response of the Southern Health and Social Services Council

Introduction

The Southern Health and Social Services Council is an independent statutory body with responsibility for keeping under review health and social care services in the Southern Board area and for representing the views and interests of service users to decision makers.

Council membership includes nominees from among the elected representatives of the 5 City and District Councils in the Southern Area and members appointed through the public appointments system. This response to the Review of Public Administration reflects the views of that diverse membership on how services to the Northern Ireland public should be administered.

1. The view of the Southern Health and Social Services Council (hereafter referred to as the Council) is that in developing any new system of public administration the characteristics of that system, in order of priority should be:

- ◆ Quality of service
- ◆ Efficiency and effectiveness
- ◆ Democratic responsibility
- ◆ Equality and human rights
- ◆ Community responsiveness

2. It is the view of the Council that Northern Ireland is over governed and that the current arrangements for delivering health and social care services is an illustration of the inappropriateness of the current arrangements for a population of 1.7 m people. The Council believes that resources could be released for the provision of services if the

number of Boards, Trusts and agencies currently administering services was significantly reduced.

3. The Council recognises that the private sector has always played a role in the provision of public services in Northern Ireland and that this pattern is likely to continue. The public's experience of the role of the private sector in the HPSS has been mixed. The privatisation of some support services in earlier decades did not achieve universal improvements for service users. The current use of private hospitals to reduce hospital waiting lists is seen, in the short term at least, to be in the interests of patients.

Decisions on the role of the private companies in the public sector should be made on grounds of efficiency and effectiveness and not on the basis of political dogma. The use of private sector organisations should be compatible with the characteristics for the public services as outlined at Paragraph 1 above.

We believe that it is in the interests of the public that the community and voluntary sector continues to provide services in their own right as well as in partnership and under contract to local government. The community and voluntary sector also has an important advocacy role to play in the field of health and social care which should be acknowledged and supported by government.

The ongoing work on developing agreed standards to be used as the basis for inspecting and registering an increased range of services in the HPSS should ensure that services in all sectors are provided to an appropriate standard. Where services are provided under contract funding levels should reflect the true cost of developing and maintaining high quality services.

4. We believe that major public services should be the responsibility of a smaller number of new local Councils. Bringing services together

under one local body will allow for greater opportunities for co-ordination.

5. There is evidence from the HPSS *Investing for Health* initiative of the potential for partnerships to deliver significantly results than organisations could have achieved separately. We take the view that such partnership would be best supported by the local government arrangements referred to in paragraph 4 above.
6. There is an impression among the public that the public sector has had little success to date in harnessing IT in the interests of service users. Our Council is aware of evidence in the HPSS of imaginative and effective use of new technology as well as waste and inefficiency through the use of expensive and incompatible systems. In general it is the view of our Council that there are still many lessons which the public sector could learn from the private sector on the effective application of new technologies. Benefits to the community will only be realised if government can apply high level skills and effective leadership to the task of developing e-government. Inevitably further development of e-government will widen the 'digital divide' unless fundamental inequalities in our communities are tackled.
7. The Assembly and executive, working through government departments should set the strategic policy framework and standards, and be accountable for these. They should also have responsibility for assessing need and allocating funding to local Councils accordingly.
8. It is the view of the Council that most of our major public services should be the responsibility of local government. The use of Non Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) should be largely discontinued as responsibility for service provision passes to local government. We accept that it may be necessary to retain a limited number of NDPBs to for the provision of specialised services.

9. Having local authorities as the main provider of services will allow for greater democratic accountability. Councils should have a committee structure dealing with each specific area of service. A general 'watchdog' group, with specialist sub-groups mirroring the Council committee structures should be established to keep services under review. The watchdog group should be made up of service users and community representatives appointed under agreed local processes.
10. It is the view of the Council that raising the status of local Councils through devolving a greater range of responsibilities to them would increase their potential for providing strong civic leadership. The improved status of local Councils would also encourage interest in participation in local government to the overall benefit of our democratic processes.
11. The Council has considered the 5 models for public administration presented in the consultation document and takes the view that an adaptation of Model 5 represents the best arrangement for public administration in Northern Ireland. Major public services should be the responsibility of a smaller number of local Councils. A specialist sub-committee structure will facilitate the development of the expertise required for service development and delivery. A generalist 'watchdog' group with structures mirroring the Council committee structures would enhance user representation and participation in decision making across all services.

In this model government departments should be involved only to the extent necessary for regional planning purposes, assessing need for services and allocating resources.

12. It is the view of the Southern Health and Social Services Council that effective health and social care services can be provided through an adaptation of Model 5. We recognise the need for further refinement

of the model to accommodate the arrangements for the provision of regional services. Mechanisms are needed at departmental level for the commissioning of regional services, but as under current arrangements, many of these services can be provided effectively by local organisations.

Summary

The view of the Southern Health and Social Services Council is that Northern Ireland could effectively be administered by a less complex and less expensive system of public administration. Reducing the number of bodies involved in the administration of the HPSS could allow additional resources to be applied to the provision of services.

Greater co-ordination between services could be achieved if all major public services were provided by a smaller number of local Councils. Raising the status of local Councils is in the interests of our democratic processes generally and should enable Councils to exercise a greater degree of civic leadership.

The process of accountability could be enhanced by the development of mechanisms to represent the interests of service users across all Council functions. The structures for the delivery of local services need to be supported by mechanisms at the centre for commissioning regional services.

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