



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Subject:	Review of Policy on the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland
Date:	23 rd May, 2008
Reporting Officer:	Mr Peter McNaney, Chief Executive
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1.0	Relevant Background Information
1.1	The Review of Policy on the Location of Public Sector Jobs was established in December 2007 at the request of the Northern Ireland Executive. The Review originated in 2006 following the initial RPA announcements when a cross-sectional estates working group was formed to develop a framework against which well informed and evidence-based decisions on the future location of public sector jobs would be taken.
1.2	This work culminated with the publication, in January 2007, of a set of draft “Guiding Principles on the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland” which had been issued for consultation. Members will recall that the Council had submitted a formal response to this consultation exercise in March 2007.
1.3	Having considered the responses to the initial consultation exercise, “Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland”, the NI Executive approved a two-pronged approach to taking this issue forward: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ establishing a framework to provide a robust process for decision-making on the location of RPA-related bodies; and ▪ undertaking a time-bound review of policy on the location of public sector jobs in Northern Ireland.
1.4	In November 2007, The Department for Finance Personnel published, in November 2007, a Framework to Underpin Decisions on the Location of Public Sector Jobs resulting from the Review of Public Administration (a copy of which is attached at Appendix 1) and an independent review of policy initiated.
1.5	The Review Team, lead by Professor George Bain, has been asked to put forward ‘a set of practical recommendations for the longer-term approach to the location of public sector jobs (including civil service jobs) in Northern Ireland and propose an agenda for action. A copy of the Terms of Reference and membership of the Review Team is attached at Appendix 2 .
1.6	In order to inform this process, a series of public meetings had been scheduled across Northern Ireland between April 16 th and 9 th May 2008 to seek views and comments regarding the future location of public sector jobs. Council representatives (both officer and elected Members) had attended the event scheduled in Belfast on Monday 28 th April, 2008.
1.7	Members will note that the Review Team had stated that the public meetings were not consultation events but rather a means to capture the general views and comments of stakeholders. A period of consultation will follow the publication of the findings of the Review Team which are expected in late Summer.

2.0	Key Issues
2.1	As Members will be aware, the dispersal or decentralisation of civil service jobs from the greater Belfast area has been a key political issue for a number of years. Members will accept that an affirmative dispersal policy would have severe implications for Belfast given the current large concentration of public sector jobs which are located within the city.

2.2	The outworking of the Review of Public Administration process will result in a number of public bodies which presently have headquarter premises situated throughout Northern Ireland will ceasing to exist. In relation to, for example, the Health sector, the four Health and Social Services Boards to be replaced by a Regional Public Health Authority and the previous 18 Health Trusts reduced to 5 Health and Social Care Trusts. In education, the four Education and Library authorities will be reduced to a single Education Authority. In addition, the decision to reduce the current twenty-six Councils to eleven will also result in a further rationalisation of the public sector estate.
2.3	The cumulative effects of potential headquarter closures could have a significant detrimental impact on many market towns and cities across Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is vital that a robust and transparent policy framework is put in place to ensure that future location decisions are properly informed.
2.4	Whilst the designation of employment locations will inevitably remain a territorial issue of contention between District Council areas, with each seeking to improve employment and economic opportunities for citizens, due consideration must be given to the strategic impact and sustainability of (re)location decisions for Northern Ireland plc.
2.5	Whilst the Council recognises the need to strengthen regional cohesion, all efforts should be taken to ensure that the strategic significance of Belfast, as both the primary engine for economic growth and regional gateway, as stated within the Regional Development Strategy 'Shaping Our Future 2025', is not compromised through future decisions on the location of public sector jobs.
2.6	It should be noted that the public sector has played a significant role over the last decade in supporting the revitalisation of Belfast and has directly assisted in alleviating the traditionally high levels of unemployment and income poverty experienced within the city. The sector remains one of the city's main employers.
2.7	Members are advised that recent relocation and dispersal policy developments in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland have primarily focused on the decentralisation of public sector jobs from the main capital cities of London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Dublin.
2.8	Any decision(s) taken by Central Government to decentralise public sector employment from the greater Belfast area must, therefore, be viewed with caution and should be governed through the existence of a robust and transparent policy framework.
2.9	Accordingly, a draft Belfast City Council written response is attached at Appendix 3 for Members consideration. It is intended that the draft response would be submitted (subject to any proposed amendments being made) to the Review Team to inform its discussions regarding future policy on the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland.

Resource Implications

There are no Financial or Human Resource implications contained within this report.

Recommendations

Members are asked to consider the draft Council response attached at Appendix 4 and agree its submission (subject to any proposed amendments being made) to the Review Team.

Documents Attached

Appendix 1: DFP Framework to Underpin Decisions on the Location of Public Sector Jobs

Appendix 2: Review Team's Terms of Reference and Membership

Appendix 3: Belfast City Council draft written response