

Executive Training Programme

CroSPiAn II - An INTERREG IVA Funded Programme

Module One

Visioning Local Government: Reform, Realisation, Responsibility

Post Module Report



24th September 2013

Glencarn Hotel, Castleblayney



International Centre for Local and
Regional Development

BACKGROUND TO MODULE 1

Recognising that natural hinterlands – or “functional territories” – do not adhere to man-made boundaries and thus neither do the functions of local government, there is a growing awareness among the councils in the Irish border region that enhanced collaboration and joint work on common priorities must move up their agendas. Public sector collaboration in the Irish border region can be significantly enhanced through strengthened leadership skills, access to innovative practices and opportunities to build knowledge networks among colleagues. The ICLRD’s experience is that high-level training and animation can help both senior officials and elected representatives in local authorities to have a better understanding of how their development opportunities are linked and fit into a larger strategic context.

The Executive Training and Animation Programme for cross-border region councils, using the successful ICLRD model linking training and animation developed under CroSPlaN I, targets the 22 Councils involved in the three local authority-led cross-border networks, namely:

- Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN);
- North West Region Cross Border Group; and
- East Border Region Ltd.

The programme will be delivered through a programme of plenary sessions, seminars, discussion forums and working groups.

As demonstrated in CroSPlaN I, this programme will improve the quality of cross-border cooperation and provide a critical forum to bring together cross-border councils, selected cross-border bodies and central government departments to support joint solutions supported by collaborative agreements.

The programme will consist of 10 modules; with post module reports to be prepared for the initial five plenary sessions.

Please see the training website for more information on the modules and various readings
<http://iclrd.org/training-crosplan/>

INTRODUCTION

This module is intended to explore the role of local government on the island of Ireland; with a particular emphasis being placed on the opportunities and challenges posed by the governance and planning reform agendas being progressed in both jurisdictions - *'Putting People First'* in Ireland and the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland. The module will also look at various tools that are available to local government and communities to ensure that their policies - and resulting actions - are based 'in fact' i.e. are evidence-informed.

The module will not only consider the impact of reform on the Executive and Reserved functions of local government in both jurisdictions but will also draw lessons from good practice elsewhere - extracting the transferable principles that can be applied to local government, North and South.

SESSION 1: Governance and Planning Reform on the Island of Ireland

Mr. David Walsh, Department of Environment, Community & Local Government

The publication of 'Putting People First' calls for the fundamental reorganisation of local governance structures to allow for the devolution of much greater decision-making to local people. Early actions as part of this have included the merger of Limerick County and City councils, and Tipperary North Riding and Tipperary South Riding. The context behind this proposed reform of local government is that the structures of local government across Ireland have largely remained unchanged since 1898 - and whether they remain fit for purpose must be questioned. Local government in Ireland not only has a weak financial base but also have a very narrow range of functions when compared to local government structures across Europe. so a review of the workings and structures of local government is timely - and some would argue, long overdue.

As part of the proposed reform agenda, it is proposed that local government be given:

- a new suite of functions - including economic development, community/local development and enterprise support
- a secure and sustainable funding stream
- greater operational efficiency through a programme of shared services, performance agendas and a greater emphasis being placed on the needs of the customer
- stronger ethics and accountability oversight - with senior officials being tasked with providing stronger leadership.

The reform programme also includes a series of rationalisation measures including the abolition of town councils which are deemed to be isolated units lacking power and resources which in many instances duplicate the functions of the county councils. The abolition of 80 town councils will also see a drop in the number of councillors serving the country from 1,627 to 949.

The shift to municipal districts - drawn across current municipal towns but also including their hinterlands - will lead to greater subsidiarity / more local accountability with decision-making being at the heart of the community. The municipal districts will be charged with promoting the development of towns, conducting civic and ceremonial roles, engaging with policy and regulatory functions such as planning and housing. Elected representatives in turn will play a key role in the strategic development of the county as a whole - with policies and practices having to be compliant with regional/national policies.

In terms of financial reforms, these include the harmonisation of rates, putting in place clearer funding flows and more streamlined financial procedures. funding, for example, will flow directly to municipal districts - thus allowing locally retained funding to be used for grants and the districts having freedom in terms of how this money is spent.

The legislation behind all this change/reform is expected to be published within the next month; with enactment of the legislation expected by December 2013 - with Orders to be place by February 2014.

At the same time, a lot of other changes are taking place across the policy spectrum which impact on the workings of local government; these include:

- the establishment of Irish Water
- the introduction by 2015 of a single annual rate on valuations (ARUs) per county - accompanied by a base-year adjustment
- changes to budget from 1 June 2014.

Q&A with Mr. Walsh

In addition to personal statements and reflections, participants also posed a number of questions. These are paraphrased below along with the speakers' responses in *italics*

Mr. Walsh was asked whether the new Municipal Districts will be planning authorities?

Mr. Walsh responded that the planning authority will remain the city/county council structure. He indicated that the Districts can develop small area plans - but that any planning function within these will be retained at city / county level.

Mr. Walsh was asked to elaborate further on the financing of the Municipal Districts - and the reduction in the number of councillors across the country.

Mr. Walsh replied by explaining that presently, rates are set by the town councils and these tend to be lower than the county rates. With the abolition of the town councils, a standard rate will be applied across counties. With the current global recession, businesses are struggling - but at

the same time, councils need to provide a certain standard of services which in turn require a revenue stream. The challenge is finding the right balance.

While there will be a reduction in the overall number of councillors, it is still felt that there is adequate numbers to represent local areas. In saying this, elected representatives will need to work differently. It is not central government's desire to legislate for every eventuality so it is important that common sense - and the common good - will prevail.

In closing this session, one councillor took the opportunity to express dissatisfaction with 'Putting People First' arguing that the reforms it proposes did not come from a consultative process but rather there is a sense that the Minister is taking advantage of the economic situation to further stifle the voice of the elected representative.

Ms. Linda McHugh, Department of Environment

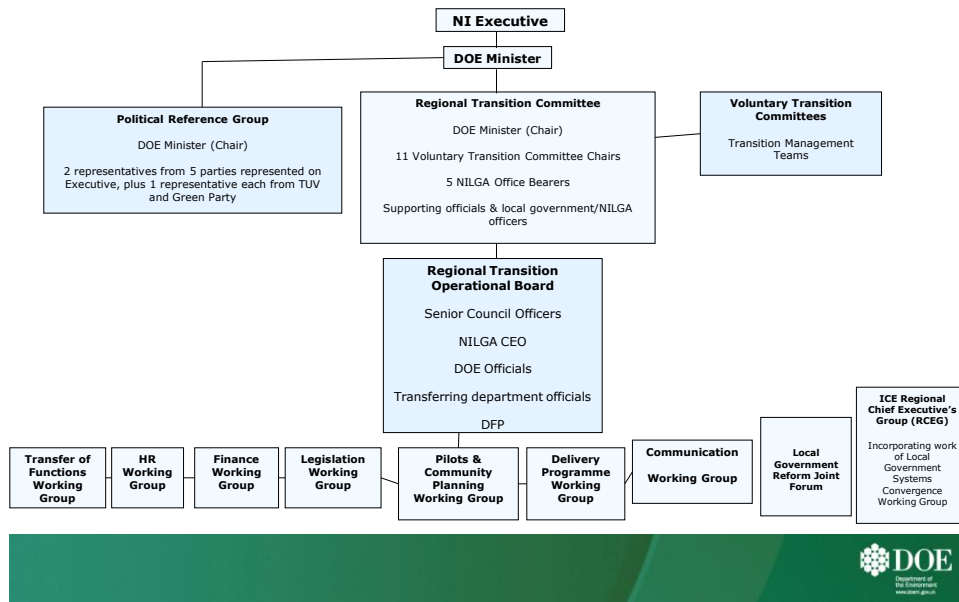
Ms. MacHugh noted, that while the Reform of Public Administration, has been a lengthy process, there are only 18 months remaining before the new council structures come into being. When first announced, there was a lot of interest and good-will towards the process. However, its protracted nature has meant in turn that it has been a difficult process. Under the Reform process, there are four key changes happening simultaneously:

- the reduction in the number of councils from 26 to 11
- the transfer of some central government functions to local government
- new powers being created for local government incl. community planning and the power of well-being (general power of competence)
- new governance and performance management framework being adopted.

The Bill behind this local government reform programme was introduced earlier this week. as well as considering models/structures of local government - recognising that no one size fits all - it also introduces new ethical standards and a code of conduct for councillors. It also details a new service delivery and performance management regime.

To aid the councils in preparing for this transition, the Voluntary Transition Committees were replaced by Statutory Transition Committees in July; and the emphasis is now on planning for operational change. Ten of the eleven councils are now in place. In May 2014, local elections will be held and the new council structures will run in shadow form until 1 April 2015 when they will officially come into existence..

Local Government Reform Programme Regional Delivery Structures



Given the political nature of Northern Ireland- and indeed the reform process - a Political Reference Group has been established so that different parties can air their views and a structured debate be held. This group meets regularly to discuss political issues.

In HR terms, this is a very busy period as we must bring staff with us on this journey; recognising that reform equates with higher workloads initially at the local level. For example, each authority must now begin to catalogue its assets and liabilities, systems must be converged so that come 1st April 2015, merging councils operate as a single unit. This brings with it questions of centralised processes / shared services agendas.

The process of appointing the new CEOs for the super-councils will be shortly through an open panel process - which brings with it its own difficulties.

And with the new functions being transferred to both officials and elected representatives, there is a recognised need for capacity building programmes to be put in place; it is essential that people are supported through this process of change. The transfer of functions is being aligned to organisational design - the emphasis being placed on local government having the powers to not only shape places and communities physically but also socially and economically. a key feature of this is amalgamating the current centralised planning portal into each local authority.

The process of reform will, of course, not cease of 1st April 2015. While there will be a bedding-in period, the councils - and indeed Central Government - must also continue to look to the

future in terms of how local government can continue to meet the ever-changing needs of its citizens.

Q&A with Ms. Linda MacHugh

In addition to personal statements and reflections, participants also posed a number of questions. These are paraphrased below along with the speakers' responses in *italics*.

Interestingly, it was noted by a number of elected officials present that there are still a lot of people in denial over this process of reform - that despite the numerous time delays to date, the process is still being rushed through. It was put to Ms. MacHugh that the process should be more 'evolutionary' than 'big bang' and as such, the elections proposed for May 2014 should be postponed.

There were numerous questions around the power of competence and what exactly this means

Ms. MacHugh acknowledged that this was still being teased out - but the simplest way to explain it at present was that elected representatives can currently do whatever they want under this power provided there isn't another power to prevent them doing so...so it is a type of 'catch-all' power.

Ms MacHugh was then asked to speak a bit more on the boundary design process of the reform programme.

Ms MacHugh noted this was a political decision - as was the decision to run with 11 councils (over other options tabled). Ms MacHugh continued that change costs money and that both central and local government will eventually see cost savings emerging from this process - but this will not happen overnight. the ICE programme for example has projected a series of cost savings. One benefit that should be immediate is that of rates - and rates costs coming down. However, the achievement of savings largely lies in the hands of local government - they must take responsibility at an early stage for this.

Mr. John Driscoll

Mr Driscoll noted with interest that the reform processes on both parts of the island have largely happened independently of each other - yet they have similar objectives; not least the aligning of local services with local revenue streams.

There are already a number of existing North-South relationships - and the reform of local government provides many opportunities for the creation of further collaborative arrangements. The focus of these, however, should be considered sooner rather than later - it should not be

left until 1st April 2015 when the new council structures formally come into existence in Northern Ireland and the 'transition period' comes to an end.

while 'proximity creates opportunities', how aligned functions on a cross-border basis will 'bump' into each other is not yet clear. This will not happen accidentally - nor should it; this should be carefully planned by respective councils working closely together and visioning for shared, collaborative working agendas.

Scope exists for greater collaboration across a number of fields, namely:

- local economic development
- planning and development
- tourism
- urban regeneration
- recreation.

While reform processes play out in space, the Irish border region is a unique laboratory for locally driven - centrally supported collaborative action.

SESSION 2: Toolkits for Evidence-Informed Planning

Mr. Justin Gleeson, AIRO

Mr. Gleeson introduced delegates to the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) which offers on-line tools for evidence-based spatial planning across the island of Ireland. AIRO is a research unit and spatial data portal focused on improving evidence informed planning in Ireland. It collects, analyses and provides evidence and tools to support better planning and decision-making, maps data, provides policy advice, and undertakes research and training in the use of data and its interpretation.

The toolkit includes a series of mapping modules based on 15 themes, data visualisation graphs and tables, and geographic profiling. The capability exists for local authorities to incorporate these modules into their own corporate websites.

The modules recognise the reform processes underway in both jurisdictions and it is possible to work with the data across the new boundaries coming into effect over the next two years. For example, AIRO is already working with Meath Local Authorities on providing an economic baseline mapping toolkit to support the emerging LECP process.

Supported by ICLRD and Trutz Haase, AIRO has developed the first proto-type all-island deprivation index. Its tools support a range of practitioners across planning, housing, transport, economic development, education provision, health access, etc.

SESSION 3: Drawing Inspiration from International Good Practice

Prof. Peter Roberts

Governance is more than government – it is about the management of “collective affairs or public realm” . This implies that in looking at governance reform it is essential to look both at formal government structure and functions and the wider network of relationships. It is equally true that governance reform is not a single point process, rather it is a continuous process of adjustment. While practice elsewhere may not be directly applicable to the island of Ireland, there are general principles that offer guidance.

Prof. Roberts then posed a number of questions to delegates on the reform processes that they are experiencing in their respective jurisdictions:

- What do you expect of the reform of local (and regional) government and of the wider governance of place?
- What are the strengths of the existing systems that you want to carry forward?
- What are the weaknesses that you wish to address and either eliminate or rectify?
- What guidance from practice elsewhere would help you to make the most of reform?

Responses included:

- ✓ The power to influence the processes of planning, social development, community planning
- ✓ regional government reform - ensuring that the best is taken from the existing structures and brought to bear in the proposed new structures; that the boundaries are right and workable (scale-dependent)
- ✓ Greater local accountability
- ✓ Getting the process of community planning right from the outset
- ✓ Capture the knowledge of those officials and elected representatives retiring.

Picking up on some of the points raised by Mr. Driscoll, Prof. Roberts noted that no two jurisdictions start from the same place, that there are also wide variations within jurisdictions – urban and rural, rich and poor, large and small. Yet, many government structures assume that everywhere is the same and that it is possible (or even desirable) to have equal provision. Prof Roberts also noted that it is also the case that government structures are based on an assumed level of financial resource, technical competence and political capability. It may be the case that the wider reform of governance assumes the existence of an even pattern of actual (or potential) partner organisation - not forgetting, of course, that the main objectives of the machinery of government are to discharge tasks effectively, acceptably and comprehensibly.

Reform occurs to promote more effective governance which reflects the drivers of change in the wider world and ‘bottom-up’ challenges, to modernise systems of representation, delivery, partnership and organisation, and to modernise the delivery of services. However, this modernisation agenda may leave elements untouched and the envisaged efficiency gains may

not emerge or may top out. Reform also provides a distraction and offers a false prospectus - thus allowing central government to avoid addressing more fundamental problems!

The key question for both jurisdictions is this: is reform driving governance by looking in the rear-view mirror rather than facing the future through the windscreen?

Some lessons from practice elsewhere include:

- Reform is not an end point – it is a stage in a process of evolution – so plan for the next change
- If you want to go beyond government reform then the actors/organisations involved in governance need to be included in the entire process (and beyond)
- Reform should not focus on creating bigger or deeper silos – examine the case for cooperation and joint service design and delivery at the outset
- Don't forget or ignore the local/community level – it is easy for larger structures to ignore grass roots
- If you want to achieve governance then you need to involve the full range of authors/organisations throughout.

MODULE CLOSE

Ms. Creamer closed the module by thanking the attendees for their participation and looked forward in anticipation to their active participation in Module 2 on 3rd October 2013.

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