LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM PROGRAMME

1.   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to log the key lessons learned from the implementation of the Local Government Reform Programme. The content of this paper is based on the experiences of the Local Government Reform Programme Manager, and interviews with the Senior Responsible Officer, the Director of Local Government Reform, an officer involved with the planning project and a local government change manager.

The key lesson 'themes' that emerged over the duration of the programme are summarised in the following paragraphs and may be a useful point of reference for future programme or project teams.

2.   KEY THEMES

2.1   Programme Management

In the haste to get the Programme up and running, the establishment of an appropriately qualified and staffed programme management office took a back seat. To have established the Programme Management Office (PMO) at an earlier stage would have increased the focus on effective programme management arrangements. The failure to staff the PMO with appropriately trained staff at an early stage made the process much more difficult than it might otherwise have been.

The programme would have benefited from closer engagement between teams internally when the three tier reporting structure was being established: the Regional Transitional Operational Board (RTOB), Regional Transitional Committee (RTC) and the nine task and finish working groups. Lack of

engagement at the start contributed the creation of fairly cumbersome reporting arrangements as, at times, extra layers were added as "sticking plasters". .

During the implementation stage of the Programme within DOE, there was a project, covering the transfer of planning functions to councils and there was the overall local government reform programme managed by Local Government Policy Division. As a result both areas reported independently to Departmental Board and the Minister. There were a significant number of cross cutting issues and while Planning had a project board, a Departmental Coordination Group with similar membership was also established. This dual arrangement required a substantial time commitment from a number of individuals as many issues were discussed twice. It would have been less cumbersome and less of a drain on staff resources if the planning transfer project had reported to a single DOE-based PMO and a single programme board had been established.

2.2   Communication

It was generally felt that overall communication for the Programme was very good both in terms of the information shared but also in terms of the timeliness of the information. The Department established a communications working group which had membership from the local council areas, transferring departments, the Local Government Staff Commission and TUS. A sub group of the communications group, comprising communications officers from all council areas, the transferring Departments and Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) was also established to provide updates on the work being undertaken as the programme moved closer to the go live date.

A monthly reform/inform bulletin was issued which highlighted the important issues and the key achievements for that month.

Communication is considered to have been a particular strength of the programme bearing in mind the size of the programme, the number of Departments involved, the strong political interest and continual media interest particularly as the programme moved towards conclusion.

2.3   Resources

Due to the number of reporting processes, there was considerable demand on staff resources particularly at senior level within both central and local government.   Staff had to complete and update reports and also to attend numerous meetings on a very regular basis.   The resources assigned to the Programme Management Office were more than adequate to do the job required but the skill mix was not adequate and staff lacked sufficient experience/aptitude. As a result the work in the Programme Office was being processed at the wrong grades and decisions on day to day issues had to be made by the programme manager when responsibility could have been taken at a lower level.

2.4   Reporting

As above, it is clear that it would have been beneficial if the Programme Office had been more involved at the initiation stage of the Programme and had controlled reporting processes from the start, rather than reporting having to be tailored as the programme progressed and the meetings were scheduled.   This would have avoided significant reporting time lags which meant that information was already out of date when presented to the Regional Transitional Operational Board (RTOB) and the Regional Transition Committee (RTC).   This created a requirement for for interim reports.   This was a further drain on resources and meant that different sets of reports were required for the RTC meeting which resulted in confusion at meetings and duplication of effort.

2.5   Reporting Structures

Role of Regional Transition Operational Board (RTOB)

The RTOB was set up as a quasi programme board but unfortunately it lacked the authority of a Programme Board. It was established in April 2012 to provide regional operational support. The RTOB did not make decisions on key issues nor were members accountable for progress or given ownership of tasks.   The

group became engrossed in finance and rating issues which tended to dominate the agenda. A key lesson from this was that a Programme Board with the appropriate authority should have been established rather than RTOB.

Role of Regional Transition Committee (RTC)

RTC was established to provide the political interface between local and central Government. Due to its lack of authority and inability to provide clear advice to the Minister, it was mainly ineffective. The chair did not make the group accountable for the progress within their respective councils and meetings were dominated by statements read by local government members. The RTC was replaced by the Partnership Panel six months before the implementation date. The Panel was established as a formal mechanism for liaison between Executive Ministers and local government elected members; it did not play an effective role in programme management.

Role of the task and finish working groups

Nine task and finish working groups (TFWGs) were established during the early stages of the programme to scope the work required and take it forward. However, as the programme progressed, it became apparent that some of the groups did not see their role as taking forward tasks but mainly to discuss what needed to be done. There was resistance to closing some of the TFWGs down as some members believed that meetings were required for the Department to provide updates and for members to influence legislation, etc. These communication needs could and should have been addressed through the communications strategy. Groups should have been stood down as soon as it was clear that they either had no further tasks to complete or were unlikely to address the required tasks.

2.6   Succession Planning

One of the advantages that the Programme had was the continuity of the personnel involved. Had key staff changed in substantial numbers during the duration of the programme, this would have led to a loss of knowledge and delays in the work. The personnel changes that occurred were not significant enough to cause any problems within the programme.

2.7   Stakeholder Engagement

The programme did not complete any meaningful stakeholder mapping work. In the absence of this, it was not always clear that effort was being expended on the right stakeholders. To have had this mapping work completed would have ensured appropriate engagement with those stakeholders who had the most power and influence, rather than those which were most vocal.

3.   <u>CONCLUSION</u>

There are a number of positives that can be drawn from implementation review. All Programme objectives, as set out in the programme implementation plan, have been achieved and the councils successfully implemented their work plans to ensure that they were operational on 1 April 2015. However, in any similar future programme, it will be important to bear the following learning points in mind:

➢ A properly resourced PMO, staffed with suitably skilled and trained people should be established at the earliest stage possible;

➢ A formal Programme Board should be established from the beginning;

➢ Care should be taken to ensure that governance structures are fit for purpose, have a clear (and useful) role and do not overlap;

➢ Task and Finish Working Groups should focus on individual tasks and be stood down as soon as those tasks are finished;

➢ Reporting should be timely, but this depends on early integration with governance structures;

➢ Stakeholder mapping is important – if done properly and revisited regularly, it will allow communications efforts to be properly focused and can also provide evidence to justify communication priorities;

➢ Dedicated, professional communications staff should be embedded into PMOs.