The reform of public administration in Northern Ireland: A squandered opportunity?

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Abstract

The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland was heralded at its launch in 2002 by the then First Minister as an opportunity to put in place 'a modern, accountable, effective system of public administration that can deliver a high quality set of public services'. Some ten years on, it remains a work in progress. The process of reform became enmeshed in the on-off pattern of devolution, at which point direct rule ministers in the Northern Ireland Office assumed control and reached 'final' decisions in 2006 to radically restructure local government, education, health and other public bodies. With the restoration of devolution, local ministers felt no sense of ownership of the reforms and made significant changes. What started out as a rational exercise in administrative reform became mired in party politics and is unlikely to complete until 2015.

Keywords: Public administration, Northern Ireland, local government, education, health, public bodies

Introduction

The current system of public administration in Northern Ireland is directly linked to the devolution of powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in December 1999 as a result of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, 1998. Prior to devolution, six government departments were responsible to direct rule/Westminster ministers, whose major preoccupations were security and constitutional issues, leaving senior civil servants to administer key public services in a largely unaccountable way. These circumstances resulted directly from wider political developments that led to the prorogation of the local parliament (Stormont) in March 1972. One of the underlying factors behind the protests that characterised the early period of the conflict in Northern Ireland was discontent with public services among the nationalist population. The early 1970s, for example, witnessed the civil rights movement demand major reforms in local government in order to address Unionist hegemony asserted through gerrymandered electoral wards, restricted franchise and discriminatory housing practices (Birrell & Murie, 1980; O'Dowd et al., 1980). Reforms came in the shape of the Macrory report (Government of Northern Ireland, 1970), which divided services into regional (Stormont) and district administrative units (local authorities). Macrory's proposals were, however, overtaken by political events and the implementation of direct rule from Westminster. In the absence of a regional tier at Stormont, what emerged was an emasculated form of local government and key public services delivered through a highly centralised system of public administration (Knox, 1999). Direct rule witnessed ad hoc reforms to public sector structures and a hugely bureaucratic response to the delivery of basic public services.

With devolution, the six pre-existing government departments responsible for public services under direct rule reconfigured and expanded to ten departments, with an additional department – the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) – to manage the programme for government and the agenda of the new executive. In April 2010 another department, the Department of Justice, was added as a direct result of the devolution of policing and justice powers (the so-called final piece of the devolution jigsaw), making a total of twelve government departments. In 2011–12 the total expenditure on devolved public services amounts to £10.3 billion, and the public sector employs 31 per cent of the workforce in Northern Ireland, or around 214,000 people (Department of Trade and Investment, 2012).

The restructuring of departments had no administrative logic, but was the outcome of political negotiations between the main political parties (mostly the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP), who agreed that the Northern Ireland Executive should comprise twelve ministers: six Unionists and six nationalists. The creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly and a regional tier of government added to an already congested political landscape, which now features 3 MEPs, 18 MPs, 108 MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) and 582 local councillors for a population of 1.8 million people. In addition, a complex mosaic of government departments, agencies, local authorities, non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), quangos, boards and trusts constitute the public sector. This prompted criticism from the Comptroller and Auditor General, who described the public administration system in Northern Ireland as 'disastrously fragmented'. Almost every public body in Great Britain that carries out any function of government, he argued, 'is duplicated on a tiny scale within Northern Ireland and that is an impediment to clarity and an enormous inefficiency' (Dowdall, 2004, p. 21).

Devolution impelled an examination of the overall architecture of government. The (then) First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly announced that one of the major tasks facing the devolved executive was public administration reform, something that he saw as central to the way public services would be structured, organised and delivered in the future. This was an opportunity, he argued, 'to put in place a modern, accountable, effective system of public administration that can deliver a high quality set of public services to our citizens' (Trimble, 2002, p. 5). This paper examines the reform of public administration in Northern Ireland since its inception and the tortuous process towards implementation, yet to be completed, and assesses its impact against the original goals to date.

The review process

The Review of Public Administration (RPA) was launched in June 2002, and its terms of reference reflected the need to restructure the administrative architecture within a devolved system of government as follows:

> To review the existing arrangements for the accountability, administration and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland, and to bring forward options for reform which are consistent with

> the arrangements and principles of the Belfast Agreement, within an appropriate framework of political and financial accountability. (Northern Ireland Executive, 2005, p. 138)

Under the original timescale for the review, a final set of recommendations should have been reached by the end of 2003. Almost ten years on, it remains a work in progress.

In general, the announcement of the review was welcomed by local politicians, many of who had been frustrated in their role as local councillors by what they perceived as unaccountable public officials operating under direct rule circumstances. The scope of the review, however, attracted criticism in that its terms of reference excluded government departments established by the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. The official position was that while the review was likely to have implications for the *functions* exercised by the executive, the *institutions* and the divisions of functions between the departments were not part of the review's remit. The inclusion of government departments was rejected on the grounds that the review should not be used as a way of renegotiating the agreement 'by the back door'. The rationale was simple, albeit bizarre, from a purely administrative perspective: with devolution so precarious (and so it proved to be until 2007), nothing could be allowed to endanger its fragile continuance. With the exclusion of government departments, the parameters of the review were restricted to an examination of health, education, local government and quangos. Aside from local government, which is devoid of major functional responsibilities in Northern Ireland, large spending bodies in health, education and social housing came within the review's remit (some 140 organisations) – a popular decision because these functions sat within a governance structure that largely comprised ministerial appointees, or 'quangocrats', and therefore lacked democratic accountability.

Aside from the parameters of the review, its conduct attracted criticism because it was carried out by a group of civil servants based in the OFMDFM, supported by a panel of independent experts 'in the fields of governance and organisational change' (Northern Ireland Executive, 2005, pp. 9, 145). Characterising civil servants as 'budget maximising bureaucrats' (Dunleavy, 1991) in a rhetorical question, one politician asked, 'officials will have a vested interest in keeping their own administrative empires going – who has ever heard of a civil servant who has been anxious to reduce the number beneath him [*sic*] in the pyramid?' (McCartney, 2002, p. 14).
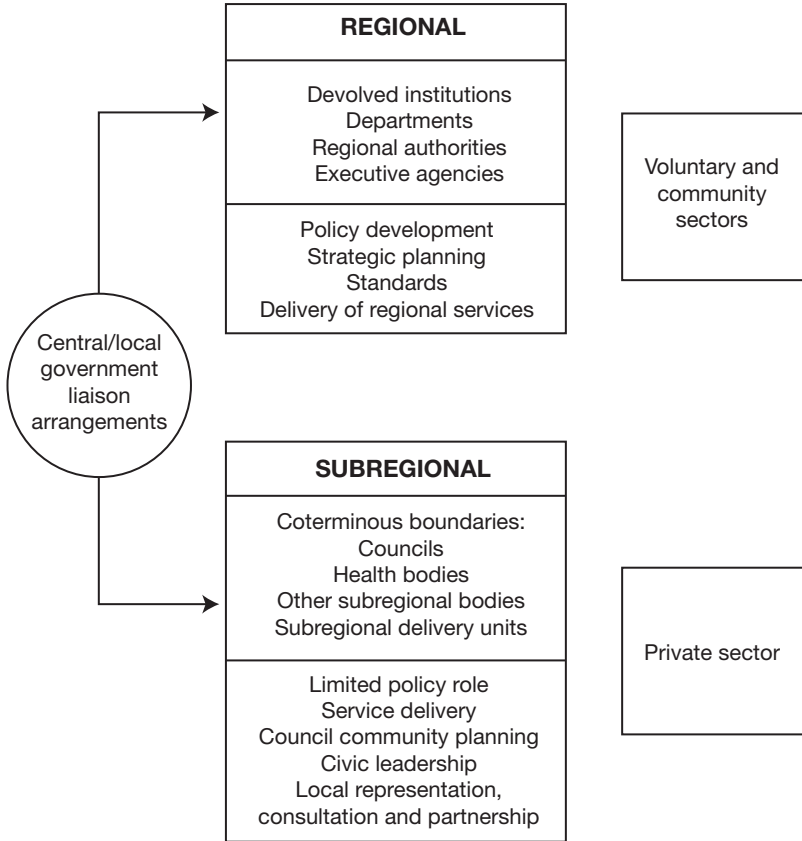
The original expectations at the launch of the review were quickly dampened when the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended in October 2002 and the RPA became the responsibility of British (direct rule) ministers, who were determined not to act as mere caretakers. In fact, the British minister with responsibility for the RPA set the benchmark against which its success can be judged when he commented, 'improving services to the public lies at the heart of any new model of public administration' (Pearson, 2004, p. 2). There was an acknowledgement that the 'reform process is not an end in itself and is only of value if it results in measurably better services for the public that deliver real value for money' (OFMDFM, 2004, p. 89).

The review process was thorough, underpinned by widespread consultation and a large body of empirical evidence, which included six probability sample attitudinal surveys covering Northern Ireland; consultation focus groups with over seventy organisations affected by the review; international study visits to consider how public services were organised in other countries; comprehensive mapping of the public sector; commissioned academic briefing papers on key issues; and two major public consultation exercises, which asked the public to respond to emerging findings (Knox, 2008). Central to the consultation proposals was a two-tier model of public administration. The first tier would be a regional tier encompassing the assembly, government departments and regional authorities, the focus of which would be developing policy, setting standards and delivering regional services. The second tier, a subregional tier, would encompass organisations that ideally operate within common boundaries, to include councils, health bodies, subregional bodies and delivery units of regional bodies. The model assumed delivery at the subregional tier (subsidiarity) unless economies of scale (or other factors) dictated delivery on a regional basis (see Figure 1).

Northern Ireland Office Minister (at the time) Ian Pearson offered his views on the 'final' reform model as follows:

> I envisage the Assembly with departments sitting at regional level with responsibility for policy, strategic planning, setting standards and monitoring performance. At local level, larger, more powerful councils could have responsibilities for an increased range of functions … I will also be examining the scope for significant reductions in the number of public bodies, in particular, the administrative structures around health and education. (Pearson, 2004, p. 1)

Figure 1: Two-tier model of public administration

| **REGIONAL** |
| Devolved institutions |
| Departments |
| Regional authorities |
| Executive agencies |
| Policy development |
| Strategic planning |
| Standards |
| Delivery of regional services |

Voluntary and community sectors

Central/local government liaison arrangements

| **SUBREGIONAL** |
| Coterminous boundaries: |
| Councils |
| Health bodies |
| Other subregional bodies |
| Subregional delivery units |
| Limited policy role |
| Service delivery |
| Council community planning |
| Civic leadership |
| Local representation, consultation and partnership |

Private sector

Source: Northern Ireland Executive (2005, p. 22).

The 'final' decisions of the RPA announced by the (then) Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Peter Hain, were contained in the document *Better government for Northern Ireland*. Hain pointed out that 'ideally local politicians in a local Assembly should be taking decisions on all the key issues affecting the people of Northern Ireland'. In the absence of devolved government (at that time), the outcomes of the review were to ensure that 'taxpayers will get better value for money through the savings made in reducing bureaucracy being redirected to front-line services' (Northern Ireland Executive,

2006, p. 3). The savings from the review (based on certain assumptions around its implementation) were estimated at £200 million per year (Deloitte, 2006). The reforms included the reduction in the number of local councils from twenty-six to seven, the establishment of a new Education and Skills Authority (ESA), and the replacement of four existing health and social services boards by a Health and Social Services Authority (more details below).

The restoration of devolution and the establishment of a power-sharing executive in May 2007 witnessed local political parties revisit the outcomes of the review. Former Health Minister Michael McGimpsey claimed in a memo to his staff that 'the Review of Public Administration is not my plan, as I was not involved in the decisions taken under Direct Rule' (McGimpsey, 2007, p. 1). Former Education Minister Caitríona Ruane stated that 'the Review of Public Administration project in education is too big and complex' to try to implement in the planned timescale (Ruane, 2007, p. 2). She therefore agreed, with the endorsement of the Northern Ireland Executive, to postpone setting up the new ESA by up to one year. Former Environment Minister Arlene Foster announced a new review of structural and functional reforms in local government – a 'review of the review', if you will. In summary, Northern Ireland ministers were keen to distance themselves somewhat from the RPA decisions of their British predecessors.

The outcomes

The 'final' decisions from the RPA reached by the devolved administration (Northern Ireland Executive, 2006) are now summarised.

Local government
- The number of councils will reduce from twenty-six to eleven by May 2011. The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner submitted his recommendations to the Department of the Environment on the new boundaries in June 2009.
- Councils will have a statutory duty to lead a community planning process, and all other agencies must work with the councils. Councils will also be given the power of well-being.
- A range of functions will transfer to local government including aspects of planning, rural development, the public realm aspects of

local roads functions, urban regeneration and community development, a range of housing-related functions and local economic development and tourism.

Education
- The ESA will replace the current five education and library boards by January 2010, and take over the functions currently carried out by the education and library boards, the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment, and the Regional Training Unit. It will also be responsible for the front-line support currently undertaken by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (Irish schools).
- The ESA will absorb the role of the Education Staff Commission, which dealt with recruitment, training, and terms and conditions of employment of officers of the education and library boards. It will also undertake some of the functions currently performed by the Department of Education.
- The Youth Council will come under the ESA, as will youth services administration.
- A new statutory Advisory Forum will be established as a major source of advice between education sectors and the Department of Education.

Health
- The eighteen health trusts were reduced to five, and have been fully operational since April 2007 (the Ambulance Service remains as a separate trust).
- Four new organisations were established in April 2009:
    - a single Health and Social Care Board, replacing the existing four health and social services boards, and focusing on commissioning, resource management, and performance management and improvement;
    - a Public Health Agency, incorporating and building on the work of the Health Promotion Agency but with a much wider responsibility for health protection, health improvement and development to address existing health inequalities and public health issues for all the people of Northern Ireland;
    - a Business Services Organisation, providing a range of support functions for the whole of the health and social care system (the Central Services Agency was dissolved and the

    majority of its services were incorporated into the new
    organisation);

- a single Patient and Client Council, which replaced the health and social services councils with five local offices operating in the same geographical areas as the existing trusts, to provide a strong voice for patients, clients and carers.

Other public bodies[1]

- In order to streamline public administration, clarify accountability and ensure public services are easily accessible and customer-focused, the number of these bodies will decrease from eighty-one to fifty-three. This will be achieved, in the main, by merging bodies or transferring complete functions to local government or central government. Many of the remaining bodies will have reduced responsibilities through the transfer of some of their functions to local government.

It is clear from the above outcomes that the review focused on structural reforms, the reorganisation of the machinery of governance. It also became synonymous with the devolution process and was influenced by party political considerations rather than a focus on improving public services. Government ministers operating under devolution did not want to simply accept the decisions of a process presided over by 'direct rulers'. In an overview of the outcomes of the RPA, Birrell argued that:

> The reforms represent a reduction in the number of existing organisations and some reconfiguration of functions, as well as demonstrating an institutionalist and somewhat traditional approach focused on existing traditional sectors and institutions … In practice, the final outcome consists of a package of disparate changes, representing a number of influences, streamlining of structures, cost cutting, and enhancing the functions for local government, but also of increased centralisation of other functions. (Birrell, 2008, p. 781)

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[1] A public body is not part of a government department, but carries out its functions to a greater or lesser extent at 'arms length' from central government. The term 'public body' is a general one, which includes NDPBs, public corporations, and health and social care bodies/special agencies. NDPBs are the most common public bodies.

Importantly, however, almost ten years on from its inception, the review remains largely incomplete. Local government reorganisation has yet to happen, the ESA is not in place, reforms in the health service (the only sector that has implemented the RPA reforms) have been criticised and the number of 'other public bodies' has actually increased. We now consider progress against the 'final' decisions of the RPA and its impact against the original goal: 'measurably better services for the public that deliver real value for money'.

Implementation

Local government
Local government reform was hailed as one of the key components in the review. Given its relatively minor role in delivering public services and associated spending (some 5 per cent of the public budget), the key recommendations were to reduce the number of councils from twenty-six to eleven, with increased powers for local government. At an earlier stage in the reform process, when devolution was suspended, British ministers sought to impose a seven 'super-council' model, which failed to achieve local political support. This was seen as part of a wider strategy by the British Government to create momentum for political progress, which helped lead to the St Andrews Agreement (October 2006). Strong local government was agreed as one of the key principles underpinning the review. What have emerged, however, are a small number of additional functions added to the limited portfolio of local services currently delivered by councils. Indeed, senior officials in local government have suggested that what is on offer are those services which central government no longer want, and will be transferred to councils without proper funding in place, such as local roads. To compensate for limited functional responsibilities, councils will be given mandatory community planning and well-being powers, although the detail has yet to be agreed. This will allow councils to hold to account those statutory bodies that deliver public services in their areas (government departments, health trusts, agencies and quangos) through a community plan. While this offers the potential for councils to exercise leverage without direct functional responsibility, it remains to be seen just how influential local government can be when faced with large recalcitrant public bodies that default on their local commitments (Knox, 2010).

Notwithstanding discussions about the future role of local government, the other concern is why there are still twenty-six district

councils when reorganisation should have been completed by May 2011? Local government reform, in fact, illustrates the hugely political nature of the RPA, which has moved some distance from its original brief to examine arrangements for the 'accountability, administration and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland' to a process that became embroiled in sectarian politics. In March 2008 the Northern Ireland Executive agreed to cut the twenty-six district councils to eleven and promoted the decision as proof that the DUP and Sinn Féin could reach agreement on a key public policy reform. Up to that point the programme of local government reform had cost £5.5 million with no outcomes. The (then) Minister of the Environment, based on an economic appraisal, predicted savings of more than £400 million over a period of twenty-five years by moving to the eleven-council model (Department of the Environment, 2009). To make this happen, local government boundaries had to be agreed and in place for elections to the new councils in May 2011. Proposals from the independent Local Government Boundaries Commissioner were disputed by the (then) DUP Department of Environment Minister, Edwin Poots, who had direct responsibility for councils. Specifically, Minister Poots opposed proposals for Dunmurry – a district electoral area within Lisburn City Council, where he was also an elected councillor – to transfer into adjoining Belfast City Council.

There are two explanations for the minister's intervention. The minister claimed that some 60,000 residents of Dunmurry wanted to remain part of Lisburn City Council rather than Belfast, where council rates (local property tax) were higher, and that their views had not been heard by the Boundaries Commissioner. The second explanation came from Sinn Féin, who accused the minister of attempting to gerrymander boundaries, of an unprecedented move to unilaterally change proposals from the Boundaries Commissioner and of a conflict of interest in his roles as a minister with responsibility for local government and also as a councillor in the area under dispute (Butler, 2010). Deadlock ensued between the DUP and Sinn Féin over the issue, and the commissioner's proposals for local government boundaries could not be agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive. The minister's opposition effectively scuppered plans for local government reorganisation, and elections took place to the twenty-six existing councils in May 2011 (at the same time as the Northern Ireland Assembly elections), with plans for new structures now postponed to 2015.

Education

Education reforms are no less controversial. The education policy landscape is one of declining school enrolments, overprovision of school places, a parallel system of controlled (Protestant) and maintained (Catholic) schools resulting in duplicated services, and a decrease in the education budget. In short, the current system of education provision is simply unsustainable, with the minister claiming there are 85,000 empty desks in schools (O'Dowd, 2011, p. 3). The decision of the RPA to establish the ESA was seen as a key mechanism to rationalise the plethora of education quangos, plan in a unified way the future education estate and save £20 million per year in so doing. The ESA is not yet in place despite an implementation team working on its formation since 2005 at a cost of £11.5 million (Clarke, 2011). All political parties supported the establishment of the ESA, but it became part of a series of disputes between the former Sinn Féin Education Minister Caitríona Ruane and the statutory education oversight committee in the assembly. She attracted significant controversy in her trenchant views on, inter alia, academic selection (the 11-plus debate), the establishment of the ESA and the promotion of, and support for, Irish language schools. Unionist politicians lost confidence in her, and she failed to secure executive approval on key policy changes.

On the specific issue of setting up the ESA, the Protestant churches, which had handed over their schools to state control in the 1920s ('transferors'), felt they were not adequately represented on the proposed new body. The new Education Minister, John O'Dowd (Sinn Féin), has adopted a more conciliatory approach by trying to build consensus with education stakeholders and has cultivated a good working relationship with the education committee in the assembly, and there are now plans to establish the ESA. The minister brokered agreement on its structure by giving the churches (Protestant transferors and Catholic trustees) greater representation to secure their full cooperation. Legislation will be introduced by 2013, the eight bodies that currently control education will be wound up in 2014 and the ESA will be fully functional in 2015, some thirteen years on from the RPA's launch. The proposed constitution of the ESA Board will be eight church representatives, eight political representatives (allocated through the d'Hondt method, where parties choose ministries according to their electoral strength) and four appointees chosen by the Education Minister. In other words, the existing education quangos, so often criticised for lack of political accountability, will be replaced by a super-quango.

Health

The health and social care sector in Northern Ireland is the largest public service, accounting for £4.4 billion of public expenditure per year. The RPA was the culmination of a series of reforms already in train at that time, and hence health as a functional area was able to respond quicker to the requirements for change than other sectors. The aims of the RPA reforms in health and social care were to reduce costs, create better-quality and safer services through improved governance and assurance arrangements, streamline the number of bodies, target health and well-being, and reduce health inequalities (McGimpsey, 2008). In a recent review of the health and social care sector, the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland assessed the outcomes of the RPA against some of the original claims. Health and social care bodies were set a target to achieve £53 million in efficiency savings by 2010–11 under the RPA reforms. The largest element of these savings was expected to come from the reduction of eighteen health trusts to five in order to realise cost savings of £39 million. Other health and social care bodies – the Health and Social Care Board, Public Health Agency, Business Services Organisation, and the Patient and Client Council – were expected to achieve the remaining efficiencies. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, using its own financial data, showed a shortfall in savings of over £4 million, which it claims will be achieved through shared services in 2012–13. Alongside this, the Comptroller and Auditor General reported that he 'would have expected greater savings in management and administration costs across the health and social care sector' (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2011, p. 4). He also noted that operational performance against most measures, such as waiting times for inpatient treatment, outpatient appointments, diagnostic tests and emergency care, had declined considerably since March 2009.

The Audit Office evaluation was hardly a ringing endorsement of the RPA. In fact, the RPA has since been superseded by yet another review of health and social care in Northern Ireland (the so-called Compton review). The Chief Executive of the Health and Social Care Board, John Compton, and a small independent team were tasked by the Health Minister to provide 'a strategic assessment across all aspects of health and social care services, examining the present quality and accessibility of services, and the extent to which patients, clients, carers and communities are being met' (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2011, p. 3). The review was

asked to bring forward proposals for the future shape of services and provide an implementation plan covering a five-year period. Structural reforms recommended by the review team, which reported in December 2011, included a reduction in the number of hospitals from ten acute hospitals to between five and seven hospital networks, a shift of resources from hospitals to enable investment in community health and social care services, and the closure of long-stay institutions in learning disability and mental health, with more impetus given to developing communities services for these groups. The recommended changes suggested a shift of £83 million from current hospital spend and its reinvestment into primary, community and social care services, and £70 million transitional funding for the new model of service to be implemented. Less than five years beyond the implementation of the RPA, the results of which received a mixed report from the Comptroller and Auditor General, another review recommending fundamental changes is currently with the Health Minister.

Other public bodies

Much criticism had been directed at the number of NDPBs that existed in Northern Ireland during the direct rule era (Greer, 1999; Meehan, 1997). These quangos had been a way of extracting public functions from a system characterised by partisan political clientelism and placing them in unelected boards and trusts with direct accountability to the minister. NDPBs were frequently cited as examples of the worst features of direct rule, in particular because of the appointment process and its propensity for cronyism – a cadre of the same people were represented on several quangos, referred to in a derisory way as quangocrats. Although an exact comparison is difficult to make because of the way in which public bodies are categorised, Table 1 shows the pre- and post-RPA statistics for 'other public bodies'. The target for the RPA was to reduce the number of these bodies from eighty-one to fifty-three but, in fact, the statistics show there has been an increase to eighty-nine 'other public bodies'. The so-called 'bonfire of quangos' has turned into a damp squib.

The recently completed *Draft programme for government 2011–15* makes no further commitments to 'delivering high quality and efficient public services' beyond establishing the eleven-council model for local government by 2015 and forming the ESA in 2013 (Northern Ireland Executive, 2011, p. 52). That said, it has become a political expedient to axe one of the current twelve government departments. When the newly created Department of Justice was formed in April 2010,

Table 1: Number of public bodies pre- and post-RPA

Public bodies	Executive NDPB	Advisory NDPB	Tribunal NDPB	Health and social care bodies	Public corpora- tions	Other bodies	Total
Pre-RPA	34	16	11	19	1	–	81
Post-RPA (March 2011)	48	13	7	13	1	7	89

Sources: Northern Ireland Executive (2005) and OFMDFM (2011).

following devolution of policing and criminal justice functions to the Northern Ireland Assembly, a compromise deal was agreed between the DUP and Sinn Féin whereby Alliance leader David Ford was elected on a cross-party vote as Minister of Justice rather than via the d'Hondt mechanism. This arrangement created an anomaly in that the Alliance Party held two ministries with fewer seats than the Ulster Unionists and SDLP (with one ministry each). This agreement is due to run out in May 2012 under a 'sunset clause' written into the Hillsborough Agreement, and a proposal is now in place (at the time of writing, January 2012) that the Alliance Party would continue to hold the Department of Justice but forfeit its second ministry. The consequence of this is that the Department of Employment and Learning, presided over by Alliance's second minister, Dr Stephen Farry, will be abolished and its functions transferred to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Education, led by a DUP and Sinn Féin minister, respectively. The Alliance leader reacted angrily to the proposal, arguing that while his party supports a reduction in the overall size of the executive, ad hoc changes such as the one proposed are a 'political carve-up which have nothing to do with good government' (Ford, 2012, p. 6).
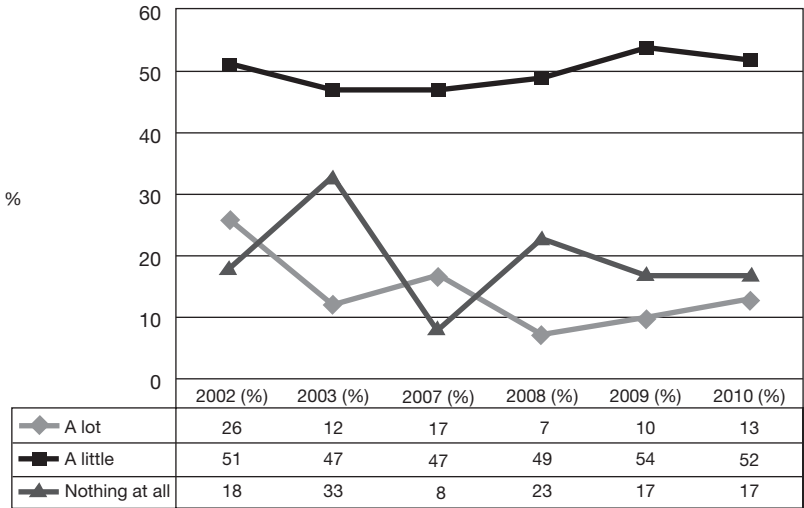
The impact

So what have been the impact of the RPA and the lessons learned from the process? The RPA, from its inception, became inextricably linked with the wider political developments associated with devolution in Northern Ireland, itself a product of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. It has therefore become mired in party politics and, as a consequence, neither been fully implemented or achieved its potential 'to put in place a modern, accountable, effective system of public

administration that can deliver a high quality set of public services' –
the original goal. Direct rule ministers used the process to attract local
politicians back to the negotiating table when devolution was
suspended. Within key public service areas such as local government
and education, issues such as electoral boundaries and the role of the
churches dominated the outworking of reforms and created long
delays in its implementation. In the one area where the RPA reforms
have been fully implemented, the health sector, an evaluation by the
Northern Ireland Audit Office was underwhelming. A new review of
health and social care has been completed and radical changes
recommended. It has also proved difficult to cut the number of
quangos, so maligned for lacking in accountability and a key target for
the RPA. In short, the RPA became synonymous with the process of
devolution, and its impact is therefore closely linked to how people
perceive the achievements of the assembly. As the First Minister
argued, 'devolution provides the foundation for peace and prosperity,
but it also allowed us to make a real difference to the people's
everyday lives' (Robinson, 2009, p. 1).

Given this link, an indirect way of assessing the impact of the RPA,
despite its partial implementation, is to examine evidence on what
people think of the achievements of the assembly. Data are available
to do this in the *Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys*, probability
surveys of approximately 1,200 adults aged eighteen years and over. In
response to the question 'Overall, do you think that the Northern
Ireland Assembly has achieved a lot, a little or nothing at all?', on six
occasions from 2002 to 2010 (excluding the periods when the assembly
was suspended) the trend is not particularly encouraging. Around half
of all respondents (Figure 2) considered it to have achieved 'very little'
(Northern Ireland Life and Times, 2002–10).

Examining the results of the respondents in more detail, it is
interesting to explore whether there are differences of opinion
between groups of respondents on how the assembly has performed.
For example, a priori, one might expect DUP and Sinn Féin
supporters to be more supportive of the achievements of the assembly.
We therefore tested whether perceptions of how the assembly
performed are different according to the respondent's political
affiliation (or the political party the respondent supported) using data
from the 2010 survey. Using a one-way between-groups analysis of
variance, participants were disaggregated into their support for the
main political parties (DUP, Sinn Féin, Ulster Unionist Party, SDLP
and the Alliance Party). The results show there was no significant

Figure 2: How much has NI Assembly achieved?

	2002 (%)	2003 (%)	2007 (%)	2008 (%)	2009 (%)	2010 (%)
A lot	26	12	17	7	10	13
A little	51	47	47	49	54	52
Nothing at all	18	33	8	23	17	17

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times (2002–10).

difference amongst the groups in relation to their opinion on how the assembly had performed: $F(4,817) = 1.15$, $p > .05$ (see Appendix 1). Hence, regardless of respondents' party support, the assembly has not achieved a great deal.

If perceptions of the assembly are perhaps too crude a surrogate measure of the impact of the RPA in the absence of any other available data, then some qualitative assessment of the review is possible. From the outset the RPA stated that it would be informed by four fundamental principles: subsidiarity, equality and good relations, common boundaries and strong local government. If one considers the proposed role for local government, there will be a marginal change in the powers of new councils and the potential offered by community planning and the powers of well-being, which lack detail at this point. The new functions will require a 25 per cent increase in council budgets and 12 per cent in council staffing (Northern Ireland Local Government Association, 2005). This suggests an annual (new) council expenditure of around £600 million out of a total devolved budget of £10.3 billion – about 6 per cent of the public purse. Councils have been offered public realm and roads responsibilities, such as weed spraying and emptying gullies, hardly the stuff of 'strong local

government' promised at the outset of the RPA. Local government will remain, for the foreseeable future, a relatively minor player in the governance arrangements of Northern Ireland. The asymmetry of power relationships between Stormont and councils has not shifted as a result of the RPA. This would suggest that there is neither subsidiarity nor strong local government.

The original intention of a two-tier model of public administration, with policy development at the regional tier and service delivery at the subregional level (Figure 1 above), was predicated on the idea of common boundaries for public services to ensure coherence in provision. In fact, the Police Service of Northern Ireland restructured their divisional boundaries to coincide with the proposed seven-council model, but the new local government structures will change to eleven councils, and there are now five health trusts. It is unclear at this point what subdivisions will exist within the ESA. Suffice to say that the principle of coterminosity has been abandoned.

It is also difficult to see how the principle of equality and good relations has been promoted through the RPA. In fact, this area has proved to be highly contentious at the regional level. Direct rule ministers developed a document entitled *A shared future*, which argued that 'separate but equal is not an option. Parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable both morally and economically' (OFMDFM, 2005, p. 15). Sinn Féin criticised the whole basis of *A shared future*, claiming that it defined the primary problem as a lack of tolerance between communities, particularly in socially deprived areas, rather than tackling disadvantage on the basis of objective need and addressing structural inequalities. *A shared future* absolved the government from any responsibilities and redirected the problem towards the two main communities, which were 'blamed' because they simply could not coexist. A new consultation document entitled *Programme for cohesion, sharing and integration* (OFMDFM, 2010), which set out the Northern Ireland Executive's vision for the future by challenging the assumption that division and segregation is a 'normal' pattern of living, has been no more successful. As one newspaper editorial described it, 'the proposed programme suggests that the Executive has set out to manage, rather than eradicate, sectarianism' ('Opinion', 2010, p. 10). The RPA has therefore added no value to promoting the principle of equality and good relations, and failed to deliver on its core principles of common boundaries, subsidiarity and strong local government.

Conclusion

In conclusion, given the links between devolution, the RPA and proposals to radically overhaul key public services, it was inevitable that party political considerations would come to dominate what started out as a rational exercise in administrative reform. Notwithstanding, it is disappointing that the review process, launched in June 2002, has not yet been fully implemented ten years on and is unlikely to complete until 2015. One important observation is that the RPA is primarily about structural reform. A programme of public services modernisation is running as an entirely separate exercise in government departments, involving centralised recruitment, shared services, technology innovation and upskilling of civil servants.

The RPA's entire focus on structural reform, which excluded one of the most important mechanisms in service delivery (government departments), would suggest an incomplete job. The fact that political parties are now calling for a review of civil service departments substantiates this claim. These structural reforms at local or central government level have political overtones that appear to have little to do with whether the new structures are 'fit for purpose', but rather the political control of the new councils and the unravelling of the Belfast (Good Friday) arrangements, respectively. More generally, politicians and officials are acutely aware that there is no correlation between quality public services and electoral accountability in Northern Ireland. Voting patterns remain firmly sectarian and hence the RPA, while important, will ultimately present no real electoral threat to politicians through lack of substantial progress or, at worse, failure to deliver on its promises.

Appendix 1:
How much has the Northern Ireland Assembly achieved by party affiliation?

Descriptives

Party affiliation or support	N	Mean	Std deviation	Std error	95% confidence interval for mean		Mini-mum	Maxi-mum
					Lower bound	Upper bound		
DUP	202	2.7030	0.84104	0.05918	2.5863	2.8197	1.00	4.00
Sinn Féin	129	2.7209	0.95995	0.08452	2.5537	2.8882	1.00	4.00
Ulster Unionist	180	2.5833	0.92074	0.06863	2.4479	2.7188	1.00	4.00
SDLP	197	2.7766	0.89833	0.06400	2.6504	2.9029	1.00	4.00
Alliance	114	2.6842	0.84472	0.07912	2.5275	2.8410	1.00	4.00
Total	822	2.6946	0.89276	0.03114	2.6335	2.7558	1.00	4.00

Test of homogeneity of variances

Levene statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
1.530	4	817	0.191

ANOVA

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	3.671	4	0.918	1.152	0.331
Within groups	650.686	817	0.796		
Total	654.356	821			

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