

Impact Case Study

UoA 22: Social Work and Social Policy

The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland

Summary of the impact

Public administration in Northern Ireland evolved in piecemeal fashion after the prorogation of its Parliament (Stormont) in 1972. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and restoration of devolved government created a momentum for radical public sector reform. In 2002 the Government appointed Review of Public Administration was launched to examine governance arrangements and to propose reform options. Carmichael and Knox researched the origins and knowledge base of the Review and its likely impact on services. This research resulted in significant impacts, changing proposals for reform in respect of the civil service, local government, central-local relations, community planning, and non-departmental public bodies.

Underpinning research

The professed aim of the Review of Public Administration was to improve the quality of public services in Northern Ireland. The research conducted for this project found that Northern Ireland adopted traditional restructuring or 'bureau shuffling'. Of itself, this will not lead to an improvement in the quality of public services. The aim of the government appointed review team was to significantly reduce the number of public bodies and create common boundaries – a kind of selective administrative rationalisation which excluded core elements of the Executive such as government departments. The research found that the reforms were disjointed with little, if any, similarity to the modernising public services agenda in the rest of the United Kingdom. This comparison, in itself, may not be important since reforms in any particular country will almost certainly be shaped by the local context and the priorities of the politicians which are likely to vary considerably. The socio-economic, political and administrative context of Northern Ireland and the role played by elite actors undoubtedly influenced what emerged from the reform agenda.

The expectations of the Review of Public Administration were enormous. Without question the structure of public administration in Northern Ireland will benefit from this rationalisation process, if only in helping the public to manoeuvre their way around the public sector maze. The review estimated potential savings of between £150 - £235m resulting from the changes and argued that these resources will be redirected into front-line services. Conveniently this allows for limited transparency in the outcomes of the review (savings are absorbed) and hence the most obvious expression of its 'success' is reducing the number of public bodies. Given the high visibility of local authorities, they have become an easy 'target' and one which the media latch on to as an example of radical reform in language such as 'axing councils'. What is on offer, however, under the guise of comprehensive reform and strong local government, amounts to little more than tinkering at the margins – bureau shuffling writ large.

The impact of this research was to constantly hold the reformers to account against claims made that structural reform (e.g. reorganising health, education, and local government) would lead inexorably to better quality public services in Northern Ireland. Instead, reforms became part of a wider political struggle some of which remain unresolved and have tested the effective working of the Northern Ireland power-sharing Executive. A public administration reform programme which commenced in 2002 has still significant aspects outstanding – a reduction in the number of local

authorities and delegated additional powers are now scheduled for 2015. Claims that the reforms would lead to savings and an improvement in the quality of public services have yet to be evidenced.

The key researchers on this project were:

- Colin Knox, Professor of Public Policy, University of Ulster (from October 1984 until present)
- Paul Carmichael, Professor of Public Policy and Government, University of Ulster (from September 1992 until present).

References to the research

The ***underpinning research*** in this case study was completed through three ESRC awards as follows:

ESRC (2000): Sub-regional Governance in Northern Ireland: the future of sub-regional governance under a devolved Assembly. Researchers: Paul Carmichael, Colin Knox and Ann-Marie Gray (award reference L327253038: £3,625).

ESRC (2002): Beyond Devolution: widening and deepening the new governance of Northern Ireland. Researchers: Paul Carmichael and Colin Knox (award reference: L219252108: £84,735).

ESRC (2007): Modernising Local Government in Northern Ireland. Researchers: Paul Carmichael and Colin Knox (award reference RES-172-25-0013: £49,564).

Key Research Outputs

Carmichael and Knox's research was judged by the ESRC end of research peer-review process to be 'outstanding'. In addition, there were a number of publications in peer-reviewed journals, edited book, and research monograph, a selection of which from 2005 onwards are:

- Knox, C. and Carmichael, P. (2005) 'Improving Public Services: Public Administration Reform in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Social Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp. 97 – 120;
- Carmichael, P. and Knox, C. (2005) 'The Reform of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: From Principles to Practice', *Political Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 4, pp. 772 – 792;
- Knox, C. and Carmichael, P. (2006) 'Bureau Shuffling? The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland' *Public Administration*, Vol. 84, No. 4, 2006, pp. 941 – 965;
- Knox, C. (2008) 'Policy Making in Northern Ireland: Ignoring the Evidence', *Policy and Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 3, pp. 343 – 359;
- Knox, C. (2010) *Devolution and the Governance of Northern Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 300 pp;
- Knox, C. (2012) 'The Reform of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: a squandered opportunity?' *Administration Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1, pp. 117 – 138.

Details of impact

The ***reach*** of the impacts, cumulatively, has been extensive in that the outworkings of the review of public administration has, and will continue, to impact on all of the public sector in Northern Ireland, notwithstanding the initial lack of involvement of civil service departments. The Northern Ireland economy is highly reliant on the public sector employing approximately 220,000 people or 31% of the workforce. The review of public administration impacts not only on these employees but ultimately on all those using public services.

The **significance** of the impacts, or how much difference it has made to beneficiaries, is listed as follows:

- By challenging from the outset the premise of the review of public administration, in particular, why government departments were excluded from the review process, it has led to proposals to reduce the number of government departments.
- By contributing to the public consultation and subsequent policy debate on the proposed number and powers of reorganised local government, the final recommendations for reform have changed accordingly.
- By the researchers acting as academic advisors to a reform task force, the research has shaped the model for regulating central-local government relations in the future.
- By conducting the first pilot exercise on community planning in a local authority the research has been used as a benchmark to roll-out this process across Northern Ireland.

By providing academic advice to two key non-departmental public bodies (Local Government Staff Commission and Northern Ireland Housing Council) earmarked for abolition under the review, their futures have been secured.

Attribution and other significant factors

It will always be difficult to establish a direct cause and effect relationship between research conducted and impacts on public policy. There is however a cumulative body of evidence to suggest that Carmichael and Knox's research was, and continues to be, seen as an independent source of data which had significant influence in a highly political milieu. The review of public administration was initiated in 2002 by the devolved administration at the behest of locally elected ministers. Given the instability associated with the wider political settlement in Northern Ireland, the Assembly was suspended four times during the period between December 1999 and March 2007 until the St Andrew's Agreement (2006) resulted in a power sharing Executive. The review of public administration became embroiled in these wider political machinations with British (direct rule) Ministers pushing ahead with public sector reforms against the will of local representatives and 'threatening' them to strike a macro political deal or live with the consequences of their imposed reforms ('like it or lump it' approach). In this politically charged environment Carmichael and Knox were able to provide evidenced-based advice to politicians and senior government officials within the wider constraints of these macro political developments. In short, their advice was valued and influenced the unfolding review of public administration in several ways.

The evidence of impacts and indicators are outlined in table 1 below.

Table 1: The Review of Public Administration – research impacts			
Key activity areas	Impacts	Evidence	Impact Indicators
Reform of civil service	Proposals in place to reduce the number of government departments by the DUP – the lead party in government (see	DUP policy document <i>Driving Forward a Reform Agenda</i> (November 2008) – see also source 7 in section 5 below	<p>A range of indicators have underpinned this research across all 5 areas. These are not disaggregated by each of the key activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research referred to in NI Assembly debates. • Oral and written presentations to Assembly statutory committees. • Acted as academic advisors to policy makers' task force. • Funding obtained under <i>Knowledge Transfer</i> ESRC initiative. • Participation in practitioners' workshop on 'Relationship between research and policy making' using this case study as an exemplar.
Reform of local government	Changes in original recommendations for local government reform: from 7 to 11 councils with additional functions	Ministerial announcement on new proposals for local government (13 th March 2008) – see also source 8 in section 5 below	
Central-local relations	New model to regulate central-local relations which will have statutory endorsement	Report of Task Force to Department of Environment on Central Local Relations (June 2006) – see also source 1 in section 5 below	
Community planning	Pilot community plan provides benchmark for roll-out across Northern Ireland	Omagh District Council Community Plan 2007-2010 – see also source 9 in section 5 below	
Reform of non-departmental public bodies	Retention of 2 non-departmental public bodies threatened with abolition	Continued operation of Local Government Staff Commission and NI Housing Council (2007-08) – see also source 2 in section 5 below	

The Chair of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) noted in 2013: “The research work which Knox and Carmichael have conducted during this period has been hugely influential in shaping the policy narrative and challenging Ministers and senior civil servants in their pledge contained in the RPA to create ‘strong local government’. They completed the first pilot study of community planning in Omagh District Council which was to become the template for other councils to adopt/adapt... Neither is inhibited in ‘speaking the truth to power’ and their ongoing contribution will be one of performing a challenge role based on their significant research”.

Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Briefing paper on public sector reform to the Review of Public Administration Team, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister: listed at http://www.rpani.gov.uk/public_service_reform.pdf
2. Testimonial from Local Government Staff Commission (available on request).
3. Testimonial from Chair of Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) (available on request)
4. Committee of the Centre, Northern Ireland Assembly, debate on the Review of Public Administration: <http://archive.niassembly.gov.uk/centre/evidence/moe020508.htm>
5. Written evidence to the Committee of the Environment, Northern Ireland Assembly on Review of Public Administration: <http://archive.niassembly.gov.uk/environment/2007mandate/minutes/071122.htm>

6. Debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly on final stage of local government legislation: Local Government (Boundaries) Bill: <http://archive.niassembly.gov.uk/record/reports2007/080512.htm>

7. Northern Ireland Assembly Research Paper on Review of Public Administration: <http://archive.niassembly.gov.uk/io/research/0702.pdf>

8. ESRC Key Findings publication: Beyond Devolution – widening and deepening the new governance of Northern Ireland:
<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/L219252108/read>

Users/beneficiaries organisations:

9. CEO, Omagh District Council, The Grange, Mountjoy Road, Omagh, BT79 7BL