

**Extracts from a speech by Head of the Civil Service, Bruce Robinson  
to Londonderry Chamber of Commerce, at the Annual Dinner  
on Friday 24 October 2008**

1. The current economic and financial difficulties are very much at the forefront of all our thinking. The economic environment is much more challenging than it has been for an exceptionally long time. Many economies around the world, including Northern Ireland, are facing a difficult period. The business community in particular will have seen, at first hand, the impact of the economic slowdown and the credit crunch on their own businesses – most notably those in the construction industry, which is experiencing a sharp downturn following the fall in property prices and the shortage of credit. But increasingly the impact is working its way through other sectors of the economy – most particularly financial services but increasingly retail also.
  
2. I recognise that all businesses are faced with rising costs, particularly energy, and many are facing falling demand from key markets including the rest of the UK, the RoI and the US. There is no doubt that we are living in difficult and uncertain times and a challenging economic environment.
  
3. In my role as Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), I believe our focus as a civil service is on delivery of the Executive's Programme for Government and realising the Ministerial priorities of efficient and effective government.
  
5. I believe firmly that the implementation of the Programme for Government represents the best way forward. While the programme was conceived some 12 months ago, at a time of rather different economic outlook, and so it may require some modification; I am of the view that it remains, at its core, a very viable strategy for the situation that we now face. Of greatest relevance to the business community is the commitment to immediate investment through the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) amounting to almost £6bn over the 3 years ending March 2011.

6. Clearly there are also a set of substantial political challenges that face the Executive at this time. However since Devolution was restored some 18 months ago it is evident to me that all Ministers irrespective of party are absolutely determined to deliver on what they refer to as “the devolution difference” – that is ensuring much better outcomes for the local electorate. I believe that we in the Northern Ireland Civil Service have responded to date very well to the restoration of Devolution. However it is also evident to me that we also have a lot more to do if the Programme for Government goals are to be achieved.

### **Trends and Challenges**

7. The objective of the Executive’s Programme for Government is, above all else, on achieving much better outcomes for the citizen and society and I believe we as civil servants should continually keep this goal of Ministers at the forefront of our thinking.

8. We face a number of challenges in working to achieve this goal. I see three particular pressures shaping our landscape:

1) Global economic and financial conditions: The public sector faces the same rising costs that business faces. While in terms of public expenditure, the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 was already a very tight settlement but public finances in Northern Ireland, like the rest of the UK, are now under even more intense pressure and will continue to be for the foreseeable future.

2) Rising citizen expectations: People have access to more information now and are experiencing excellent technology-enabled services from the private sector. The result is pressure for better outcomes, for better customer service and for efficiency savings from every part of the public sector.

3) Rapid advancements in technology: The pace of technological change is intense and brings with it new opportunities as well as challenges for government across a whole range of areas. We are investing heavily to enhance our capability and

we need to make the correct choices and secure the benefits from this investment.

9. These challenges are daunting; however it is in my view important that we set ourselves the ambitious goal of overcoming them – of achieving a transformation in the delivery of public services. I am clear that we cannot achieve a step change improvement by continuing only to do more of the same.
10. If we are serious in the NICS about taking on these challenges we need to make the following three strategic issues our priorities over the next 18 months:
  - Building a stronger performance delivery culture;
  - Developing a much sharper customer focus and more effective joined-up delivery; and
  - Growing our people.

### **Stronger performance delivery culture**

11. I am very confident that the civil service is changing. A recent attitudinal research study, conducted independently for us shows that 67% of our staff understand and accept the need for reform. This is highly significant. I was also very encouraged that two thirds of our staff stated that their manager was leading by example on reform. We now need to build on these vitally important changes and to become even more professional in our approach.
12. A stronger performance delivery culture has as its foundation a focus on outcomes for the citizen, but stronger performance delivery also requires high quality information. The shared services reform programmes such as HRConnect and Account NI will help, by giving us more accurate, more detailed and much more timely data. In addition we have developed and are developing much more extensive use of benchmarking.
13. Other evidence of the sound progress that has been made on creating a performance delivery culture is our achievement of the target of £250 million value for money gains from procurement over the period 1 April 2005 – 31 March 2008.

14. In terms of workforce targets, we achieved the reduction in the number of full-time equivalent posts in the NICS of 2300 between April 2005 and March 2008 and as we continue to invest in technology we will be on a similar trajectory over the next three years.

15. We are making major investments in improving our capacity, systems and facilities. Over the period since April 2003 to September 2008 in excess of £130m has been spent in taking forward the NICS reform programme. It is vitally important that we achieve the benefits and see the return on this investment in terms of improved quality, effectiveness and efficiency of our services.

16. Clearly developing a stronger performance delivery culture also involves looking at our human resource strategies. The Programme for Government will be delivered by and through our people and we must support their development. We do need to look closely at our HR strategies for a number of reasons, not least the changed local labour market and the implementation of HRConnect, we want to ensure a more strategic approach to people management within the NICS. This includes:

- Within the constraints of public pay policy, developing a refreshed pay and reward policy to provide more effective incentives for delivery; and
- Improving the health and wellbeing of the workforce, including better management of sickness absence.

17. On the last issue, which is a Ministerial and management priority, there has been solid progress. Over the last four years to March 2008 the level of absence in the NICS has fallen from 15.5 days to 12.9 days – a reduction of 17% and the initial results for this year indicate that we are maintaining momentum in this downward trend. While significant progress has been made, the pace of progress needs to increase, particularly when we compare our performance against the GB civil service which reported an average absence level of 9.6 days in its latest quarterly report.

18. Behind these averages it is interesting to note that just over 43% of our staff have had no absence last year while long-term absences accounted for almost 70% of the total working days lost throughout the year in 2007-08 and this was amongst a small proportion of staff – around 11%. Better performance in long term absence is therefore a key area on which we are focussing in order to achieve further overall improvement.

19. All of these encouraging results demonstrate the significant improvement in business planning that has taken place across the NICS in recent years. There has also been a clear focus on better financial planning and management. Personally I am firmly of the view that “if you fail to plan, you’re planning to fail.”

### **Customer focus and joined-up delivery**

20. Turning to the second priority area – ensuring the civil service develops a much sharper customer focus and provides more joined-up services. I believe one of Peter Drucker’s quotations is very apt for the Northern Ireland Civil Service in this regard. “Quality in a service or product is not what you put into it. It is what the client [or citizen in our case] gets out of it.”

21. The goal of satisfied customers needs to become the primary objective of all – not just some – of our staff. We have to more routinely seek customer feedback, benchmark our efforts and hold ourselves more accountable for customer satisfaction. Clearly as the NICS moves into delivery of the NI Direct project at the start of next year we will have many opportunities to effect improvements in citizen satisfaction with the delivery of public services. Considerable emphasis has been laid in the Programme for Government on NI Direct, since it is about improving public access to services and information by introducing a single telephone number and online point of contact for contacting central government. The intention is that a large proportion of the calls would be dealt with at the first point of contact. We are on track to have the first phase go live for four anchor tenants in the coming weeks.

22. And while I believe it is still some way off (due to the need to roll out the various phases of NI Direct), I anticipate part of this renewed focus on customers will be

about moving increasingly towards a position where we treat citizens as customers of government as a whole – not as customers of a particular department or agency. People shouldn't have to understand how government is organised in order to get their needs met. We have to make more progress in working across the traditional boundaries within government and developing new cross-sectoral cross-departmental partnerships.

25. The Executive, and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in particular, are very aware that the current economic conditions present local businesses with very immediate challenges. DETI, through Invest NI, is working with private sector companies to help them address the short-term pressures that they currently face. Invest NI is implementing new initiatives and tailoring existing programmes to ensure there is a suitable support-package for local companies. Invest NI is also delivering a series of seminars to alert client companies to the opportunities and challenges that may arise during the downturn. Specialist assistance will be offered across a range of areas to help businesses at this time.

26. In relation to the Investment Strategy, during the entire period of the strategy to 2018 there is planned a capital investment of £3.1 billion in roads infrastructure, of which approximately £2.5 billion will be directed to the Strategic Road Network and will include major schemes on the key strategic routes. These are record investment figures and will deliver economically significant infrastructure improvements.

### **Growing our people**

28. The third strategic corporate priority for the NICS is growing our people. As Colin Powell said, "Organisation doesn't really accomplish anything. Plans don't accomplish anything, either. Theories of management don't much matter. Endeavours succeed or fail because of the people involved". Our people are the critical ingredient in delivering better outcomes.

29. The NICS is putting in place a new people strategy to ensure the our capacity and capability to deliver on the Programme for Government to respond to the changed labour market to meet rising citizen expectations and ensure the progress to date on

implementation of reform is maintained for as long as required. This involves getting a better mix of the skills needed across the NICS and a focus on more flexible and effective resourcing – getting the right people, with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time.

30. This will be supported by more focused learning and development activities through one of the key reform projects – the Centre for Applied Learning. This new shared service is already making notable progress in terms of up-skilling staff, supporting the transformation work and delivering efficiencies. This has been recognised in its inclusion in the final shortlist for one of the prestigious UK-wide Civil Service Awards, due to be announced next month.

31. Just recently, Sir George Bain reported on the location of public sector jobs. He identified achieving better regional economic balance as the primary objective of this work and proposed a modest, phased relocation strategy. He identified six towns as a key receiving location for jobs. This was an independent review and it is important to stress that it is now a matter for Ministers to consider before any decisions on a way forward can be reached.

32. Finally, I believe that we in the Civil Service have an important contribution to make in delivering the Executive's Programme for Government by making the following issues, our strategic priorities:

- Building a stronger performance delivery culture;
- Developing a much sharper customer focus and more effective joining-up of government services; and
- Growing our people

34. It is about embedding more professional administration to deliver better outcomes. I believe that the pressures and challenges provide the imperative for transformation in order to achieve a step change in the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery. It is a long-term strategy but we will continue building on the sound progress that we have been making.

35. Everyone – citizens, businesses, service users, and service providers – has a stake in the success of public services. It is our responsibility in the civil service to focus on implementing the Executive's programme for Government, transform the delivery of government services, and to ensure the NICS makes its contribution to building a successful, dynamic local economy that benefits people throughout Northern Ireland.