

44/2000

RESTRICTED - EXECUTIVE

DRAFT

cc: PS/Mr Loughran
Mr Haire
OFMDFM Advisers
PIOs
Mrs Flanagan
Dr Smith
Mr Shannon

TO: EXECUTIVE

**FROM: STEPHEN GRIMASON
DIRECTOR, EIS**

DATE: 25 JUNE 2002

**TO: PS/FIRST MINISTER
PS/DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Following the discussion with First Minister and Deputy First Minister on the Communications Strategy paper attached to my minute of 11 March 2002, I attach a slightly amended version, updated in a number of areas and which now includes a reference to RRI, for circulation to Executive colleagues for discussion at a future Executive meeting.

As agreed EIS will be submitting to First Minister and Deputy First Minister a media handling strategy for the roll-out of the RRI to coincide with the announcement of the successful investment projects.

(signed)

**Stephen Grimson
88101**

2. A draft of this paper has been circulated to all Departments at PIO level and incorporates their comments.

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Recommendation

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3. The Executive is invited to agree the recommendations in paragraph 18 of the attached Communications Strategy paper.

Memorandum EC

TO: EXECUTIVE

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Purpose

1. This paper invites colleagues to endorse the attached Communications Strategy for the Northern Ireland Executive. The aim of the Communications Strategy is to:

- improve public awareness of the Executive and understanding of its role;
- improve public awareness of, and access to, information about government and its services; and
- present and promote the Northern Ireland Executive effectively abroad.

Consultation

2. A draft of this paper has been circulated to all Departments at PIO level and incorporates their comments.

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Recommendation

3. This The Executive is invited to agree the recommendations in paragraph 18 of the attached Communications Strategy paper.

Purpose

2. The aim of this communications strategy is to:

RT HON DAVID TRIMBLE MP, MLA
FIRST MINISTER

MARK DURKAN MLA
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

- improve public awareness of, and access to, information about government and its services;
- present and promote the Northern Ireland Executive effectively abroad.

It is designed as a framework to influence the Executive's public activity up to May 2003.

Context

3. The creation of the Executive has brought with it an expectation that the new structures will have a positive impact on people's lives in Northern Ireland. The Executive will be best placed to succeed if its vision, policies and achievements are clearly defined and properly presented to the people of Northern Ireland. People need to understand what the Executive is and what it is doing for them. The public's support needs to be encouraged and they need to feel a sense of partnership with government, a sense of ownership. The period up to May 2003 offers a

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COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

1. This paper seeks the Executive's endorsement of a communications strategy for the Northern Ireland Executive.

Purpose

2. The aim of this communications strategy is to:
 - improve public awareness of the Executive and understanding of its role;
 - improve public awareness of, and access to, information about government and its services;
 - present and promote the Northern Ireland Executive effectively abroad.

It is designed as a framework to influence the Executive's public activity up to May 2003.

Context

3. The creation of the Executive has brought with it an expectation that the new structures will have a positive impact on people's lives in Northern Ireland. The Executive will be best placed to succeed if its vision, policies and achievements are clearly defined and properly presented to the people of Northern Ireland. People need to understand what the Executive is and what it is doing for them. The public's support needs to be encouraged and they need to feel a sense of partnership with government; a sense of ownership. The period up to May 2003 offers a

real opportunity to show to the public that the Executive is making a difference.

4. For almost all of its life the Executive's work and the public perception of it have been negatively influenced by wider political considerations and the uncertainty which has resulted from these. There has only been limited opportunity to build public confidence by presenting a coherent overall message about the Executive's policies and activities. As a result many people, including the media, are still unsure of the respective roles of the Executive and the Assembly and of the Executive's policies and activities.
5. In spite of the background of political uncertainty, the achievements of the Executive to date have been considerable, for example its co-ordinated handling of the foot and mouth crisis and the recently announced Reinvestment and Reform Initiative. It is the public recognition of those achievements that is questionable. For largely political reasons, opportunities have not been seized to drive home to the public the improvements and initiatives which the Executive, as a body, has achieved. Rather, the public has seen a series of Ministerial announcements seemingly unrelated to the collective work of the Executive and its programme for change. There has been little evidence to encourage a belief amongst the public that Executive Ministers are working together. News programmes on television and radio regularly focus on the wider political differences between the coalition parties and this inevitably has coloured people's perceptions of the effectiveness or otherwise of the Executive. Occasionally Ministers have jointly worked together on the presentation of initiatives affecting more than one Department, but that has tended to be the exception rather than the rule. While there may be robust debate and legitimate differences of political opinion, the public need to see Ministers working together for the common good.

6. The Executive has also suffered, in terms of public recognition and understanding, from the absence of a clear corporate identity to establish itself firmly in the minds of the public. Early final sign-off of proposals already considered by the Executive will play a vital role in establishing easy public recognition of all aspects of the work of the Executive and developing public confidence in the new administration as a coherent whole.

Objectives

7. The following broad objectives are recommended as providing the basis for an overall communications strategy. The main presentational aims of the Northern Ireland Executive should be to show:
- (i) a strong and effective government determined to improve life for all;
 - (ii) a cohesive government working in partnership;
 - (iii) a government in touch with local concerns; and
 - (iv) a government keen to project Northern Ireland's image abroad in a positive light and to be outward looking.

Key Priorities

Promoting the Programme for Government

8. Annually, the development of the Programme for Government provides the main plank for all the Executive's activities. However, its unwieldy nature (perhaps the inevitable result of a drafting exercise involving 11 Departments) brings with it difficult presentational problems. While

specific sectoral groups have shown interest in its contents, it is beyond the interest of the ordinary man or woman on the street. In marked contrast, the public, and also the media, have a much better grasp of the nature of an annual budget. A key priority should be to produce a framework for bringing the Programme for Government and budget together in a way that is easily understood by the public and where the main priorities of the Executive, namely health, education and transport can best be promoted.

9. The Programme for Government should be regarded as a working document and not one to be publicised only at the time of its publication in draft and later when approved by the Assembly. It should be seen as the governing document for all Executive activity. Indeed, it contains all the answers to the question "What is the Executive doing for me?" It is recommended therefore that Ministerial announcements and press releases should be clearly linked to the Programme for Government and should be branded accordingly. The main themes in the Programme should be identified by individual Ministers and should influence the make-up of Ministers' diaries so that they undertake tailored and relevant events.
10. Adopting this approach will help to explain the contents of the Programme for Government in a way that people understand. It will also help if we use simple publications to illustrate the Executive's plans and achievements. For example, a relatively inexpensive method is to publish success stories in the form of a tabloid newspaper supplement. This is an approach that has been used successfully by other governments. EIS recommends that this be done in the autumn to reinforce the report on progress on the Programme for Government scheduled for the beginning of July.

Out and about together

11. A measure of the degree to which the public will believe that the Executive is a cohesive government in touch with local concerns will be the extent to which they see Ministers working together at locations across Northern Ireland. It is common practice for Ministers to undertake individual engagements across Northern Ireland but joint events/visits are relatively rare. Again, using the cross-cutting themes from the Programme for Government, joint targeted visits should become commonplace.
12. More important, however, will be the impact on the public of all Ministers getting out and about as an Executive rather than remaining in the rarefied surroundings of Stormont. This was ably demonstrated by the positive impact of holding a recent meeting of the Executive in the North West. To hold an Executive meeting, perhaps to discuss a single item agenda, in each of the counties in Northern Ireland every year would be relatively easy logistically, but would have a highly symbolic positive impact and one the EIS would strongly recommend. This is particularly true in respect of the local weekly newspapers whose influence in the regions should not be underestimated and which are likely to devote considerable coverage to Executive meetings on their turf. This will require an investment of Ministerial time, but an investment that should bring attractive dividends.

Improving understanding

13. Civil servants have many anecdotal examples of the public's lack of knowledge about the new administration. This has also been demonstrated from time to time by research undertaken by others such as the Belfast Telegraph and BBC. However this research has been largely based on political viewpoints rather than understanding of the

administration. It is recommended that some basic private market research is carried out to identify the extent of the public's awareness and understanding of the Executive and establish a benchmark against which the success of the communications strategy can be judged in the future.

14. It is anticipated that we will be starting from a low base of public knowledge. As already mentioned, the agreement of a corporate identity will have an important impact on the public's awareness of the work of the Executive. Initially, if we are to maximize recognition of the Executive's and its Departments' corporate identity there should be a publicity campaign – television advertising will reach the greatest audience. The campaign can have the dual purpose of showing the new identity and encouraging better understanding of government and access to services, for example using the Executive's website.

15. With a greater emphasis being placed on children by the Executive – and also the development of citizenship as part of the national curriculum – there is also a strong argument for developing a learning pack for schools on the Programme for Government and also on the wider mechanics of government in Northern Ireland.

Promoting Northern Ireland abroad

(Sub-Priorities 5-7 of "Developing north-south east-west and international relations" in PFG)

16. There is also much to be done to improve the tarnished image of Northern Ireland abroad. Considerable international goodwill and interest in affairs here still remain and the Executive should seek to build on that. A start has been made with the opening of the Executive offices in Washington and Brussels but the Executive needs to continue to give a lead and set the general background against which the closely targeted efforts of, for

example, NITB and others in the public and private sectors and, in the future, of INI, can be developed. With the ability to reach global audiences instantly, the internet offers a huge opportunity to present Northern Ireland in a positive light. But the information flow on the website needs to be supplemented by the production of publications targeted to international audiences and designed to improve the understanding of Northern Ireland and its image abroad.

17. Ministerial visits abroad should be carefully targeted and co-ordinated to support a set of long-term strategic objectives for the promotion of the Executive and Northern Ireland. Further work needs to be done to define the administration's objectives overseas. As part of the re-imaging process the Executive should seek to encourage and secure targeted VIP inward visits from countries of particular interest to Northern Ireland. The Executive should also note the impact abroad of Northern Ireland holding prestigious world class international events.

Recommendation

18. The Executive is invited to agree the above key priorities and, in particular:
 - (i) the presentational objectives (para 7);
 - (ii) the linking and branding of Ministerial announcements and press releases to the Programme for Government (para 9);
 - (iii) publicising the main aims and achievements of the Programme for Government in an easily understandable format (para 10);
 - (iv) a greater number of joint Ministerial events and meetings of the Executive to be held across Northern Ireland (paras 11-12);

- (v) the conducting of private targeted market research to ascertain the extent of public understanding of the Executive and its work (para 13);
- (vi) an advertising campaign co-ordinated with the launch of the corporate identify for the Executive and NI Departments (para 14);
- (vii) the development of a learning pack for schools on the Programme for Government and the mechanics of government in Northern Ireland (para 15);
- (viii) the production of publications targeted to international audiences (paras 16);
- (ix) the targeting and co-ordination of Ministerial visits abroad and the encouragement of VIP inward visits to Northern Ireland.