The Whole Is Greater than the Sum of the Parts – Lessons from Joining up Mapping, Registration, Valuation and Rate Collection in Northern Ireland

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SUMMARY

On 1 April 2008, the Government Agencies in Northern Ireland responsible for mapping, land registration, valuation and rate (property tax) collection joined to become one organisation. This was as part of a far-reaching reorganisation of government organisations. A year on, what has improved for the citizen and the State as a result of the merger? What is still work in process? And what lessons can be drawn from Northern Ireland that will be of use to other countries considering such a joining up?

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an overview (section 2) of the history of the organisations responsible for mapping, land registration, valuation and rate (property tax) collection in Northern Ireland, and for the rationale of the decision to merge them. It then moves on to consider the merger process (section 3), the significant progress made to date (section 4), and plans for the future (section 6).

Perhaps most importantly for the reader, the paper draws out (section 5) lessons learned from the experience in Northern Ireland that will be of use to other jurisdictions considering such a merger.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is a self-governing region of the United Kingdom, consisting of six counties at the north of the landmass of the island of Ireland. It has a population of about 1.5 million and a geographic area of approximately 20,000 square kilometres. This small size has perhaps been helpful in ensuring that a range of initiatives have been joined up across departments and sectors. In the Northern Ireland Civil Service, for instance, there are about 250 Senior Civil Servants, who can therefore deal with each other on something approaching a personal basis.

Coupled with this, the political history of Northern Ireland has led to a strong central government structure and very limited devolution to local government, reducing another complexity. The political situation in Northern Ireland over the last 30 years may also have generated a more positive central view of the benefits of cross-working between government organisations than has perhaps developed in other parts of the world.

Recent political developments in Northern Ireland have seen the implementation of devolved government in May 2007, with the focus in the Programme for Government (Northern Ireland, 2008) being on economic development. The private sector in the province has been limited by comparison with other jurisdictions, with 69% of GDP generated and spent in the public sector (compared with 42% in the UK as a whole, and 24% in the Republic of Ireland).

In the Northern Ireland public sector, a wide-ranging reform programme has been underway in recent years, with the creation of a number of shared service centres (for ICT support, financial transaction processing, personnel management, etc). Another focus of reform has been the reducing of the number of public sector bodies, through the Review of Public Administration.

2.2 Review of Public Administration

From the mid-1970s until the late 1990s, Northern Ireland was governed from London under ‘direct rule’. London Ministers were responsible for the functions of Northern Ireland government departments that from 1922 until the early 1970s had been the responsibility of Northern Ireland Ministers reporting to a Northern Ireland Parliament. The period of direct rule, coupled with the political situation in Northern Ireland, led to a period when a range of matters, including any review of the number and roles of government organisations, were not considered. Devolved Government returned to Northern Ireland in 1999, following the Good Friday Agreement, but was again suspended in 2002 and did not return until 2007.

In 2002, the devolved Government announced a far-reaching review of government organisations, to consider whether rationalisation was possible. The population of Northern Ireland, less than that of the city of Birmingham, was served by 19 health service delivery organisations, 26 local authorities, both a Tourist Board and an Events Company, both a Livestock and Meat Commission and a Pig Production Development Council. The review reported in November 2005 and March 2006 (Northern Ireland, 2006) and recommended a single Education and Skills Authority (instead of four Education & Library Boards), a single Health & Social Services Authority (instead of five Health & Social Services Boards) and 7 local authorities (instead of 26) – although the return of devolution later saw this number adjusted to 11.

Within the report was one line which was little commented on in the media and political discussion – that a land and property services agency would be created, to bring together related functions in a number of organisations.

2.3 Government Organisations involved in Land and Property prior to 2008

As in very may countries, not least those of the British Commonwealth, land and property organisations in Northern Ireland had historically been based around function.

A Valuation Office was formed in the 1820s, its remit covering the whole of the island of Ireland (and then separated into northern and southern organisations in 1922). Interestingly, the organisation originally had responsibility for mapping as well, this being seen as a necessary part of accurately assigning value to a property. The organisation was part of the Department of Finance, and became the Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA) (having greater responsibility for its own management) in 1993. The organisation was responsible for all valuations of all property for property taxation (rating) purposes, and has also since 1945 provided a range of professional general valuation services to government organisations. The Chief Executive was also the Commissioner of Valuation, a statutory role which is responsible for a range of appeals against valuations. In 2005, the Agency used mass appraisal techniques to undertake the first revaluation of the approximately 700,000 domestic properties in Northern Ireland since 1973, moving from valuations based on rental values to valuations based on capital values. The results were very successful, with much lower numbers of appeals against the valuations than expected. Approximately 300 staff were employed by the Agency, 150 of them chartered valuation surveyors; most of the funding was provided centrally, but some of the general valuation advice work was charged directly to customers.

Mapping of Northern Ireland began in the 1830s for taxation and land valuation purposes, and the all-Ireland organisation was divided into northern and southern parts in 1922. It was for many years under the control of the military (hence the name – Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI)), with control passing to civilians in the latter part of the twentieth century. The 1980s saw the organisation take significant strides in the computerisation of its mapping flowlines, and the 1990s saw significant developments on management issues. The organisation became an Agency within the Department of the Environment in 1992, moving to the new Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on devolution in 1999. Its revenues from licensing (mainly digital) mapping to customers in the public and private sectors fully covered its costs from 2006-07. The organisation employed approximately 180 staff, a mix of administrative grades and mapping specialists. It took forward leading edge work on the development of a spatial data infrastructure, which is further advanced in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the British Isles (see, for instance, Greenway et al, 2008).

The origin of the Land Registers of Northern Ireland (LRNI) was again an all-island organisation split at partition in 1922. Its work is governed by the Land Registration Act 1970 (which requires the registration operation to cover its costs), and it operates a registration of title with general boundaries (under which the State guarantees title but not the exact boundaries of the title). It manages three registers – a Land Register containing about 60% of titles to land (with compulsory first registration having become operational for the whole of Northern Ireland in 2003), a Register of Deeds, and a Statutory Charges Register. The organisation became an Agency within the Department of the Environment in 1996 and transferred to the Department of Finance and Personnel in 1999. It employed approximately 200 staff, most of them administrative grades but with a small number of professional lawyers. In the mid-1990s, the organisation recognised the need to move to a computer-based register, and in 1999 signed a Private Finance Initiative contract with a private sector supplier which led to a fully computerised flowline in 2004. More recently, this has been extended to provide eRegistration facilities.

The Rate Collection Agency (RCA) was the largest property tax collection authority in the United Kingdom. It was formed as an entity in 1991 by moving a number of functions within the Department of Finance into a self-standing Agency which employed approximately 300 staff. It was responsible for collecting approximately £1 billion of rates (property tax) each year, and also administering a range of reliefs and benefits related to the rates. It was traditionally one of the highest performing collection authorities in the United Kingdom. A wide range of rating reforms introduced from 2005 (and extended following the return of devolution) required a replacement of the Agency's IT systems, and significant additional staffing, and this had a significant impact on short-term performance, a situation which persisted at the time of the merger. The costs of the Agency were borne by the recipients of the rates collected – the Northern Ireland Executive and the 26 District Councils.

2.4 The joining of land and property organisations

The concept of bringing organisations involved in land and property – and particularly the four described in section 2.3 – together had been a topic of serious discussion in Northern Ireland since the mid-1990s. In a sense, this mirrored discussions (and decisions) in other parts of the world, including Australia and the Caribbean. It was given additional impetus in Northern Ireland because of the traditions (described in section 2.1) of joining and collaboration in the province, and because of the relatively small size of the organisations. Between them, organisations employing a little over 1,000 staff ran four personnel departments, produced four sets of statutory accounts and so on. However, the focus of the four organisations on their specific functions and customer base, and the fact that OSNI was part of a different Government Department than the other three Agencies, meant that no concrete steps towards merger were taken. Instead, the organisations attempted to work closely together on a range of issues, including the embedding of digital mapping within the land registration and valuation functions. The VLA and RCA had always worked closely, recognising that each relied on the other to deliver an end-to-end rating process (‘build to bank’).

A decision to merge the VLA and RCA was taken by Ministers in 2004, as part of the programme of rating reforms. This merger was progressing when the result of the Review of Public Administration was announced, and added LRNI and OSNI to the land and property organisation. A decision was made by a Steering Group of senior officials from the two parent Departments and the four Agencies to proceed with the merger in two stages, VLA and RCA merging on 1 April 2007 and LRNI and OSNI joining on 1 April 2008. Consideration was also given to some other land-related functions, such as the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland, but it was agreed that the merger should at that time proceed with the four organisations only.

On full creation in 2008, LPS employed approximately 1,200 staff and became an Agency of the Department of Finance & Personnel. It is the second largest Agency in Northern Ireland (the largest being the Social Security Agency).

3. TRANSITION

Following the Ministerial decision to create a land and property agency, senior officials in the Department of Finance & Personnel and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure formed a Steering Group, which commissioned a Scoping Study. This was undertaken by two senior officials, one an employee of OSNI (and appointed to the role of Programme Manager) and the other a former Chief Executive of LRNI. Their work involved discussions with senior managers of the four Agencies, and key stakeholders, and they produced a report in September 2006. The report considered a wide range of issues, including whether the combined organisation should be an Agency or another form, and whether functions in any other organisations should join the new organisation. The Study also proposed a number of workstreams to be taken forward as part of the merger programme. These were

- Change management and business planning
- Communication
- Corporate governance
- Shared services
- Customer service integration
- Finance
- Information management
- Strategic human resource management
- Accommodation
- Wider markets

As can be seen, the workstreams considered of a wide range of matters, from administrative to technical, and reflected where the Scoping Study team felt that benefits could result from the merger, and/or where alignment of differing existing arrangements/ policies across the four organisations was required.

The Scoping Study was approved by the Steering Group of officials from the two Departments and four Agencies, and a Shadow Agency Board for the Land & Property Services Agency was formed. This had the dual role of managing the formation of the new Agency, and being the governance body for the RCA and VLA as they prepared for merger on 1 April 2007. It was chaired by the Chief Executive of the VLA (this position of Commissioner of Valuation had traditionally been graded at a more senior level than the heads of the other three Agencies). The Chief Executives of OSNI and LRNI, not yet part of the new Agency, sat on the Shadow Agency Board to ensure alignment. They also maintained the governance structures (Board, Audit Committee etc) for OSNI and LRNI, the former reporting to a different Minister. This did not cause undue problems, with senior officials from each Department being members of the Steering Group.

The Chief Executive of VLA was due to retire in March 2007, which allowed him to chair the Shadow Agency Board without prejudicing the appointment of a permanent Chief Executive. As will be explored in section 5, however, the timing of appointing a permanent Chief Executive is, in the author's view, a key issue in such a merger programme.

At this stage, the working title of the organisation was Land and Property Services Agency – LPSA. Later, customer discussions indicated that this name was better shortened to Land & Property Services (LPS). This name for the combined organisation is therefore used throughout the rest of this paper.

The Shadow Agency Board set out with the intention of driving forward some of the key benefits that they recognised could be delivered from the joined up Agency – issues such as bringing together end-to-end processes, joining and reconciling data holdings between the Agencies (there are approximately 800,000 properties in Northern Ireland, but there were 5.1 million unlinked property references across the four Agencies), and building a coherent set of responsibilities around a land and property life cycle (from initial build through multiple occupations to final demolition). The requirements to progress short-term merger actions (such as allocating staff to a new organisational structure, and merging accounting functions), however, coupled with the continuing issues with the implementation of rating reforms and new IT systems, largely dominated the more strategic discussions. At this stage, the implementation of the rating reforms, with the linked IT replacement programme, required very significant amounts of management and staff effort, and the public and political perception of the new LPS was dominated by the rating issues.

A permanent Chief Executive for LPS was appointed in January 2007 and took up his role in April 2007. In preparation for the merger of OSNI and LRNI in April 2008, he set out a new organisational structure for the organisation, including new roles for the Shadow Agency Board members. This was a key element in moving the merger forward. The structure is illustrated schematically in Figure 1 below. As can be seen, it brings together some elements of the old Agencies, whilst recognising that some specialisms – for the time being at least – need to stand apart.

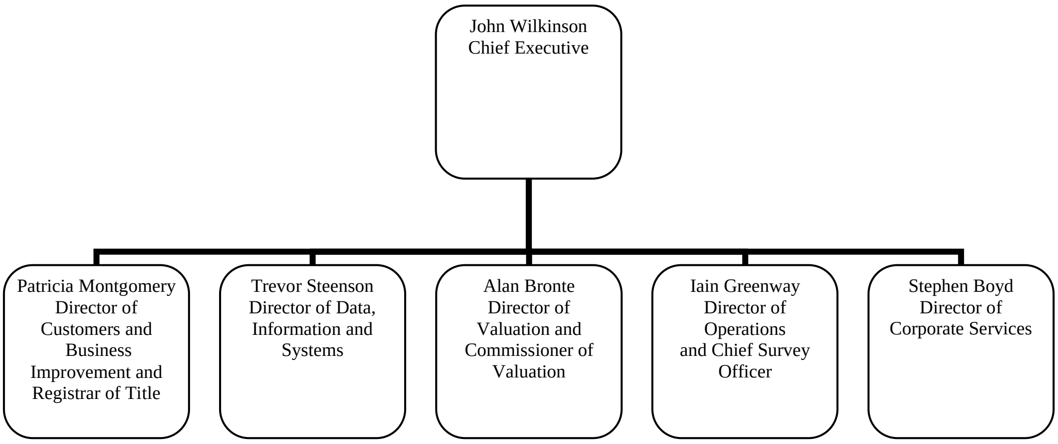

Figure 1 – LPS organisational structure from April 2008

4. THE CURRENT PHASE – INTEGRATION

Some work led by an external consultant in the summer of 2007 developed a Strategy Map for the new Agency. Although the author is not generally supportive of external consultancy input for such work (believing that it is better developed by the managers of an organisation), in this case the use of an external expert whose expertise was accepted by all senior managers in LPS allowed the process of developing the map to proceed considerably more quickly than without his input.

The stated vision of LPS in the Strategy Map is ‘to transform land and property services and information for the public good’. The Agency’s stated Mission is ‘to support the regeneration and economic development of Northern Ireland by providing an integrated set of land and property related services for its citizens and government'. As would be expected, much of the Strategy Map is looking well into the future, given the range of issues that have to be consolidated in the new organisation, but senior management have taken the view that this phase of work (2008-perhaps 2011) is focused on integrating the Agency and its services, providing a base for further transformation in the next phase. That is not to say that elements of transformation are not happening (and indeed were happening in the old Agencies) – elements such as the development of a GeoPortal (www.geohubni.gov.uk), eRegistration, and elements of the rating reforms – including the use of computer-assisted mass appraisal – can certainly be seen as transformational.

The integration phase has been taken forward both in a top-down strategic manner, shaped by the three key objectives in the Strategy Map

- Deliver effective and efficient high quality and customer-centric services, information and advice
- Collect, maintain, analyse and integrate data
- Continuously improve our processes and be innovative in the way we deliver our services

and also in a bottom-up way, showing early delivery of benefits to staff and customers. The following sections describe some of the work that is underway.

4.1 Top down data integration

One of the key elements of the LPS Strategy Map is to bring data together – on the basis that this will not only improve the data (by validating the different holdings against one another) and allow reduced storage costs – but it will also enable better data to support a better service to customers. This was recognised early on in the formation of LPS, and a Technical Group of staff from the four Agencies worked together on developing a plan to create an LPS data spine. The concept was that this would contain all data which was used in more than one part of the organisation, addresses being a key example. OSNI had been a key player in creating Pointer®, a definitive address database for Northern Ireland. This included data from Royal Mail (the postal delivery authority), house numbering and road naming from local authorities (the legal authority for this work) and classifications from VLA. Significant work on redesigning and improving Pointer commenced in 2007, and provided a basis for reconciling all of the address records in LPS, whether these be of a registered title, a property valuation, or the address to which a rate bill was to be sent. Data which was only used in one part of the organisation would not be held in the spine – for data security and efficiency reasons. Examples of such data are bank account details for customers paying rates by direct debit, and specialist mapping data for certain customers.

Interfaces with other organisations were also considered by the Technical Group, these including the Planning Service (recognising that the life cycle of a property begins before bricks are laid), and the Building Control sections of local authorities (which are responsible for confirming that building work conforms with building regulations). Conceptually, the data spine is shown at Figure 2.

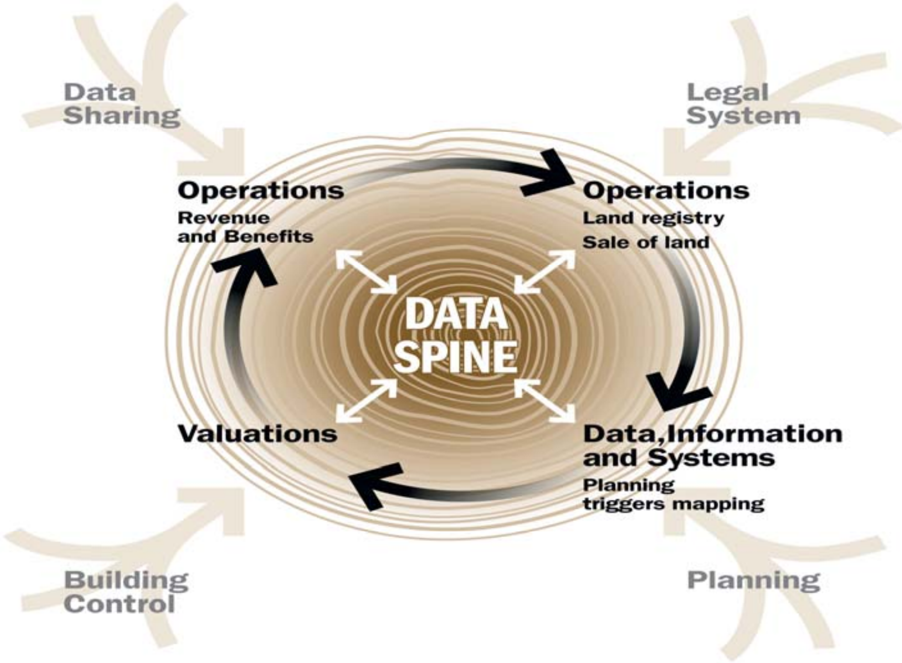

Figure 2 – the LPS data spine

A key consideration of the Technical Group was how to build the data spine, and improve data holdings, without incurring significant IT costs. This was in the context of all four Agencies having implemented extensive new IT systems over the preceding years. It was therefore agreed that, in the first instance, one of the data holdings of, for instance, addresses, would be declared the master holding, and other holdings would be validated against and updated from that. In due course, LPS would seek to move to a master holding and links to it from the other datasets. Addresses give good examples of the complexity in the detail of this – for rating purposes, for instance, the system needs to hold a property address and a billing address (which may be outside Northern Ireland – for instance a company head office). The same applies to the Land Register, where a property owner may reside anywhere in the world. The rating system also needs to hold historic addresses, and changes of addresses for individuals, to support the recovery of old debts.

The Technical Group decided to proceed in a phased manner, starting with valuation list entries, then addresses, then moving to dates (such as the date that a property ownership transfers, or a property becomes occupied or vacant). The reconciliation of valuation list entries is now complete and address reconciliation work is well advanced. LPS is now moving to validate other organisations' (for instance, local authorities and utility companies) addresses with those held by LPS, so that in due course the entire public sector uses standard addresses for each property. None of the four Agencies which formed LPS would have had the standing or status to enable it to take such a central role in this matching work.

4.2 Bottom up data joining

Alongside planning the implementation of the data spine, it was important that smaller business improvements were realised, both to enable effective delivery of outputs, but also so that staff could see the benefits of the merger at an early stage.

An example of this was validating the records of vacant properties (which attract reduced or zero rates). This work had fallen behind during the implementation of rating reforms and, because of the need to ensure equity of the rate base, it was important that it was brought up to date at an early stage. The approach taken for this was for LPS to work jointly with councils, recognising the additional resource for ground checks that could be provided by the 26 councils. All but one of the councils chose to participate, and returned over 55,000 property inspection forms, which either indicated a property was indeed vacant, or provided as many details as could be gathered of who the occupier was and the date that occupation commenced, to enable a rate bill to be issued. There were many cases in which full data could not be obtained despite repeated visits by Council staff, particularly with non-domestic properties where a significant amount of data is required before a bill can be generated.

The gathering of additional data was supported by another data joining in LPS – use of the Land Register for ownership details and date of ownership transfer. This has proved very successful, with a match rate of over 80% when searching the register (recognising the restriction that not all properties in Northern Ireland are currently registered in the Land Register – some are in the Register of Deeds). Other sources being used include other Council data holdings, and public domain information.

The links between LPS and Councils have been a key focus for LPS since its formation, recognising that the Agency is responsible for supplying mapping to the Councils, advising them on property matters, building definitive address databases with them, valuing properties for rating purposes, and collecting the rates which provide the bulk of local authority funding. A number of specific initiatives were being taken forward by the four Agencies, including the use of Building Control officers to collect measurements to enable the valuation of properties. This has provided more up to date valuation lists for the councils where it has been used to date. The greater scope of LPS has allowed the relationship to become much broader, including the putting in place of a Strategic Steering Group to manage a range of data, process and customer service issues.

4.3 End to end processes

As would be expected, each of the four Agencies had optimised its processes to best carry out its remit. Inevitably, further improvements are possible when overall processes within (and beyond) LPS are reviewed. There are, however, inevitable tensions between overall process efficiency, and efficiency of individual parts of the process. For instance, a rate bill can only be issued when a valuation is provided for an identified property, and the full name of the occupier and the date that occupation started are known. Referencing for valuation of domestic properties is done more and more without a site visit by LPS (whether using Building Control measurements or aerial photography). This has improved the efficiency of the data collection process, but does not enable early capture of occupier details and dates – meaning that there are delays in generating a rate bill whilst this data is gathered at a later stage of the process.

A Business Improvement Team has been set up in LPS to look at process improvement issues, and one of its main tasks is looking at the end to end rating process ('build to bank') that encompasses many elements of the work of LPS. This has identified the tensions between specific and overall process efficiency and effectiveness, and has already implemented a number of changes. Some of these are, on the face of it, simple – but would realistically not have proceeded when the four Agencies were separate, each with its own business targets. As one specific example, when a valuer issues a valuation certificate after a property change, a form asking the recipient to complete occupier and date information is now included, with a reply-paid envelope. This will speed up the collection of this information in many cases.

Other elements of the process currently being considered include the process of enforcing rating debt (after the Courts have found that the rate payer is in default). This often leads to a charge against the property being made – in the Land Register. The joining of LPS has therefore allowed rate collection and registration functions to consider how to improve the process to ensure that as much debt as possible is collected.

The power of graphic displays is also being harnessed. OSNI had an interactive mapping intelligence tool, STAR, which allowed the recording of intelligence on ground change (from a range of sources, including Royal Mail and aerial photography), and the graphic display of this (as well as the generation of reports and work packages for surveyors). This system is now being extended to include valuation and rating records, allowing graphic display and reporting of properties that are not explicitly linked in the mapping, address, valuation and rating records. The power of the graphic display is proving a valuable tool in improving data holdings and effectiveness.

Through activities such as these, the new organisation began to address a variety of process and data improvements which, through more holistic working, could enable greater effectiveness and efficiencies, and the same number of people achieving more. This in turn allowed the backlogs that had built up in the different organisations (in particular RCA and VLA, given the very extensive work that was required to prepare for rating reforms), to be addressed and reduced.

4.4 Customer interfaces

The four Agencies each had their own offices and their own customer interfaces. In some towns, these happened to be in the same buildings; in others, space was available to enable the different sections to come together. This has enabled a number of LPS customer areas to be created, allowing members of the public to bring queries on the entire range of LPS matters, to purchase mapping or to interrogate the Land Register. Staff with expertise in all of these functions will be on hand to support customers in this work, again emphasising the joining up of LPS and the improved service to the public.

More fundamentally, reforms in the Northern Ireland Civil Service are also happening in parallel with LPS' joining up, with a single phone number for contacting Government through a call centre being put in place (with LPS in the initial phase of work), an integrated public service web site being put in place (with LPS overseeing the property and housing elements), and consideration being given to bringing all government high street locations (motor taxation offices, social security offices, LPS etc) together – whilst recognising that this last element is a longer term project.

4.5 Key remaining issues

As can be seen from the previous sections, LPS has already made significant strides in integrating its activities to the benefit of all of its stakeholders. Progress has necessarily been constrained by the need to continue with business as usual tasks, and the implementation of rating reforms. A number of issues remain work in progress.

One of these is regularising a number of the statutory roles in LPS, including those of Registrar of Title and Commissioner of Valuation. These have independent functions in law but have traditionally been held by senior managers in the four Agencies. The bringing together of LPS, but the continuation of specific pieces of legislation around the work of each of the old Agencies, has led to a need to tidy up the legislative base. This is, however, not something that can happen overnight and continues to lead to some work-arounds within LPS.

Another key challenge for the LPS Management Board is to manage priorities across the business. This challenge, of course, exists in all businesses, but the range of work undertaken by LPS increases the challenge. The political and media priority is generally on the rating system, but many improvements in this element rely on improvements in process and data holdings throughout LPS. For instance, much of the mapping of Northern Ireland predates modern satellite positioning systems, which now highlight inaccuracies in absolute positions in the mapping (the relative accuracy is much stronger, reflecting the pre-GPS surveying methods used at the time). Positionally improving the mapping will require funding, and will improve the quality of the Land Register and the base for performing valuations. But what priority should this work be given against shorter-term improvements in rating activity?

The matter of staff development is also under consideration. LPS has inherited a range of specialist technical and professional grades, which can constrain staff rotation and development. Valuers are professional members of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS); OSNI had implemented a company-approved training scheme with the Institution of Civil Engineering Surveyors (ICES). There is no external accreditation of staff in the rating business, despite the specialist and skilled nature of much of the work. An overall HR strategy for LPS is therefore currently being developed.

Discussions with other merging (and merged) organisations highlighted the powerful support to merger and change which could be provided by new (or refurbished and reorganised) accommodation, with (for instance) open plan seating bringing together staff from the different business streams and encouraging them to work together more closely. An overarching scheme to improve Northern Ireland Civil Service accommodation, however, encountered commercial and legal delays, meaning that LPS staff are still housed in the buildings of the legacy organisations.

Some of the issues under consideration stem from outside LPS. These include further elements of rating reform, in particular the Executive decision to introduce water charging for domestic properties. There is obvious linkage with billing properties for rates, and the nature of the joining of water billing and rate billing is currently being considered. Other challenges include raising customer (and staff) awareness of LPS and its work; and considering the balance between what functions should be dispersed and which centralised (some of the Agencies having worked with a centralised model and others with a dispersed model).

5. LESSONS LEARNED

Much has been done already in the formation and consolidation of LPS; at this early stage, much remains to be done. But what lessons can at this time be drawn from the Northern Ireland experiences to guide other countries or regions considering merging these functions?

First and foremost, Northern Ireland's experience has shown the powerful synergies that can be released by joining together organisations working in mapping, registration, valuation and rate collection. These exceed those that can be realised by independent organisations working closely together whilst each retaining their own targets, governance and reporting lines.

The merger, through a series of circumstances, became a 2-stage process, with VLA and RCA joining in 2007 and OSNI and LRNI joining in 2008. This was far from ideal, and left to a range of issues (such as staff in merging corporate services functions being unclear whether they would 'lose out' as positions were filled during the first merger). A single stage merger, with a strong transition team, a permanent Chief Executive appointed at an early stage, and the Chief Executives of the old organisations assigned clear roles in the new organisation would have allowed a smoother transition. Appointment of an Independent Board Member at an earlier stage would also have consolidated governance during the transition (it was November 2008 before such a Board Member was appointed).

Earlier announcement to each member of staff of what job they would be doing, who their boss was and where their desk was (pension and pay were not affected by the merger as all members of staff were – and remained – members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service) would also have smoother the transition to the new organisation. The timing of the appointment of a permanent Chief Executive delayed decisions on organisational structure, which then delayed information to individual members of staff and led to a good deal of unsettlement of staff that could – to some extent at least – have been avoided.

The amount of change that any organisation and set of people can cope with at any one time is another issue requiring serious consideration. The rating reforms in Northern Ireland were complex and far-reaching. Their implementation is undoubtedly supported by the merging of the four organisations, but the timing and sequencing of the activities needs to be considered holistically, to avoid too much change happening at one time. There were times when the public perception and media reporting of LPS focused solely on rating matters, with the merger being presented as something which need not have been progressed at the same time as the other key changes to the rating system. Such coverage reflected on the reputation of LPS as it came into being.

A stronger emphasis – for staff and other stakeholders – on the bigger picture would also have benefited LPS, so that staff could see how their role fitted within the work of LPS., This could usefully have included clearer articulation of how end to end process review and improvement would enable better efficiency, effectiveness and job satisfaction – how it could address the 'burning platform' of backlogs that existed in the four previous organisations. Inclusion of examples of on the ground improvements also allows staff to buy in to change more effectively. LPS did this in a staff conference in October 2008, which was very well received, but in retrospect should have done something along those lines earlier. More quantitative (as well as qualitative) work on staff perceptions and attitudes, repeated on a regular basis, would also have provided the Management Board with more context for proceeding with the change programme.

The context in each country or region will of course differ – Northern Ireland's largely single tier of government, for instance, facilitated much of the joining – but the author believes that the work in Northern Ireland allows the potential of joining these organisations to be clearly seen.

6. THE FUTURE

LPS is now well into its integration phase, and has a clear focus on its work for the next two years to consolidate that integration. Staff and stakeholders have a growing understanding of the role and challenges for the organisation – and the benefits that merger has brought. Immediate challenges are to sharpen those messages, especially for the wider public, so that they understand what LPS is and how it impacts on them. Completion of data cleansing, and further strides on process improvement and staff development are also fundamental elements of the integration stage. This will be set against a backdrop of the general economic situation, which will impact the organisation's ability to collect rates, and depress income streams from land registration, mapping and general valuation services.

This integration and consolidation will put LPS in a strong position to proceed with further transformation, continuing to work closely with local authorities and other public (and private and third) sector organisations to deliver transformed land and property services and information for the public good. It will through this process become a more resilient organisation, with robust governance and business processes, consistently delivering high quality, customer centric services to an extent which would not have been possible by the four pre-existing organisations.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Iain Greenway is Chief Survey Officer of Northern Ireland and Director of Operations in Land and Property Services. As such, he is responsible for all land registration and rate collection activity in the Agency, as well as overseeing the development of the Geographic Information Strategy for Northern Ireland. He was from 2006-2008 Chief Executive of the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland. He holds an M.A. in Engineering from Cambridge University, an M.Sc. in Land Survey from University College London and an MBA from Cranfield University (including study at Macquarie University, Australia). Between 2000 and 2006, Iain was General Manager (Operations & Mapping) of Ordnance Survey Ireland, responsible for management of the operations and mapping technology of the organisation as it underwent profound changes in status, structure, processes and culture. In 1999-2000 he worked in Her Majesty's Treasury in the Secretariat to the Public Services Productivity Panel (PSPP).

Between 1986 and 1999 he worked for the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain. His positions during those years included geodetic and topographic survey, strategic planning and pricing, sales and marketing, as well as a number of management consultancy inputs in Swaziland and Lesotho and technical consultancies supporting land reform in Eastern Europe.

Iain is a Chartered Surveyor (MRICS), an Honorary Fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineering Surveyors (FInstCES), a Fellow of the Irish Institution of Surveyors (FIS) and a member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (MCIM). He is a Vice President of the International Federation of Surveyors for 2009-12 and between 1998 and 2006 he was the head of the RICS delegation to FIG. He is Chair of the FIG Standards Network and of the FIG Task Force on Institutional and Organisation Development. He is also a member of the Management and Editorial Boards of the journal Survey Review. He has published a range of articles and papers on geodetic surveys, business and management practices, sales and marketing, and standardisation.

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