

DUBLIN CONFERENCE PRESENTATION – SEPTEMBER 2007

LAND AND PROPERTY SERVICES AGENCY – A STEP INTO THE FUTURE

Good morning everyone I am delighted to be here to talk to you about the exciting developments within Northern Ireland which have led to the formation of the Land and Property Services Agency -

The Agency when fully formed in April 2008 will bring together the Rate Collection Agency, the Valuation and Lands Agency, Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland and Land Registers Northern Ireland. Phase 1 RCA/VLA merger was completed in April 2007 -

The thought process behind the merging of the 4 organisations began back in 2004 and culminated in 2005 when the decision was taken to merge the Valuation and Lands Agency and the Rate Collection Agency. Some thought had been given to also bringing Land Registers on board at this time but it was felt that the timing was not quite right.

However as I am sure you are aware there has been a major review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland and in March 2006 the Review Teams recommendation that Land and Property Services should be established was accepted by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Mr Peter Hain.

The Report stated –

“Where there are a number of bodies carrying out related functions we propose to merge these into one new organisation, streamlining the delivery of those functions and saving on expensive overheads.”

The aim -

“To ensure Public Services are easily accessible and customer focused.”

So what was the thinking behind this recommendation – well really it was that Land and Property information in Northern Ireland was spread over a wide and diverse number of organisations. In some instances organisations hold land information unique to themselves in others the same or similar information was available from different sources. All Government organisations use the Ordnance Survey mapping as the base for geographic information/mapping service – this is the case for Land Registers, Rates, Valuation, Planning, Northern Ireland Statistical Research Unit, Roads Service, Water Service etc. Here then is one common theme – the map which we all use in our day to day business – but for each organisation we use that map for a different purpose and to provide other services for similar or different customers.

The information that we all hold is however useful for a vast number of different purposes and services many needs of the citizen – but wouldn't it be so much easier if all that information could be made available from one central source.

As a lawyer and a former customer of Land Registers I always thought that the conveyancing process would be made infinitely simpler if I could access all the information I needed about a property from one source.

How easy would it be to make one contact with an organisation to obtain the mapping, rating, valuation, title documents, all available through LPS and in the future to also receive planning history, public utilities information plus for the client/purchaser, information on the nearest schools, hospitals, local transport – this would surely simplify property transactions and should be an attainable goal.

What we hope to do with LPS is to establish a firm base on which to build and look to deliver all these services in the future.

How will we do this –

Well we need to break down the barriers between the organisations – we need to get out of our silos and see that big picture – we must examine the legislation under which we operate, our working practices and processes, our customer service standards, our complaints procedures, our finances, our IT systems and whether we are providing the best service we can in the most cost effective way – are we giving value for money.

As we move forward do we form an umbrella organisation which loosely knits our organisations together or do we move to fully merge and integrate the organisations.

An umbrella organisation is not the answer – this does not bring about the changes required to deliver an improved service which is more efficient and cost effective.

The mission of LPS is

“To deliver the integrated mapping, registration, valuation and rating services essential for Northern Ireland.”

A truly merged organisation can do this – where the overlapping parts of the organisation merge to provide a better service and duplication of effort becomes a thing of the past.

As our services become merged and integrated – where we have 1 Corporate Services Team / 1 Finance Team / 1 Training Unit / 1 Customer Services Unit / 1 Complaints Procedure – we will provide a more streamlined service, staff from all 4 organisations will begin to work together, sharing knowledge and experience and out of this will be born a new organisation, with new

structures, new teams, new opportunities for learning and development, new challenges, new rewards.

And as we get the merger and integration right so we will be able to transform the service given to the customer –

What are the implications for the 4 organisations involved – basically there will be a lot of hard work ahead for all of us as we try to maintain our current level of service to customers and seek to merge our four organisations – this will not be an easy task as the merged organisation will contain over 1,000 staff at all levels, some professionally trained, others not, people coming together from diverse organizations, with different cultures, ways of working management and leadership styles but with one thing in common, delivery of Public Services.

We will need to set out short and long term goals – what can be done quickly and will give us a “quick win” for both staff and customers and what will take longer.

We will need to have an overall view of what we want to achieve and plan out how we are going to get there.

We will need to look at current and future resources, areas of expertise, succession planning, training and examine the services we must deliver in line with the legislation under which we operate and ensure that as we move forward we do not breach these obligations.

We must also examine whether we need to bring forward legislative change to enable us to deliver our existing services from within a merged organisation and looking to the future consider whether further legislative change will be required to enable us to offer more services to the citizen.

We must critically examine the financial regimes under which we operate to see if these allow us the freedom we need to develop and grow our organisation .

We need to look at our accommodation – should we have one central office only, currently there are 18 offices – do all staff need to be office bound – can we enable staff to work from home or “in the field” – eg the Ordnance Survey staff and Valuation staff – enabling them to deliver information to the office by remote access. Are there opportunities for staff in the Rating and Land Registration divisions to work remotely.

Do we need to have local offices around Northern Ireland where customers can have direct access to our services or is it acceptable to deliver those services on line.

If in line with the e-government initiative we move to deliver all our services electronically are we denying access to some customers – those who do not have access to computers or who are not computer literate. Similarly if we move away from accepting payments in cash or by cheque are we disenfranchising some citizens.

Can we provide access to all the information that each organisation holds to all citizens or could this breach the provisions of the Data Protection Legislation or indeed Human Rights legislation.

Is our desire to have ariel photographs of properties in Northern Ireland available for Rating/Valuation purposes an invasion of privacy or has Google Earth already surmounted that barrier.

Is the availability of all this information on line going to assist fraudsters? Can we offer sufficient security and protection for property owners.

Can we offer a secure mechanism for payment of fees on line – will the Inspire Directive have a bearing on the new organisation and funding of same – with some information being available free of charge and some having to be paid for by the citizen.

Should the new organisation LPS be part of a Government Department or should it be a stand alone non ministerial dept or a non departmental public body.

These are only some of the challenges that come to mind as we move forward but I am sure that with the Agency Board and Senior Management teams' support we will work through any difficulties and emerge as a modern progressive organisation which will pride itself in the delivery of cost effective up to date land information which will be of benefit to all the citizens of Northern Ireland.

And looking further into the future lets hope that we can achieve those links with the Planning Service, Councils, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Public Utility companies and may be even the Public Record Office which will enable us to provide the citizen with even more information about their property and the history of same.

Ultimately our goal is to provide a better public service for our customers and we will and must ensure that LPS delivers this enhanced range of services effectively and efficiently.