
FROM: SIR MALCOLM McKIBBIN
DATE: 7 MARCH 2017
TO: ALL STAFF

MESSAGE FROM THE HEAD OF THE CIVIL SERVICE

After polling day last Thursday the NICS Board was keen that I would write to you on its behalf to acknowledge the uncertainty that exists and to remind you of our responsibilities as civil servants in the coming weeks. We would also like to thank you for your continuing hard work and commitment.

The role of the Civil Service is to serve the government of the day, deliver its Programme for Government and remain fit to serve future administrations effectively. In fulfilling our responsibilities we work under the direction and control of Executive Ministers.

However, there have been no Executive Ministers in post since polling day last Thursday and there will be none in post until a new Executive is formed. In previous Assembly elections the First Minister and deputy First Minister remained in post until the nomination of a new First Minister and deputy First Minister. On this occasion the nominations need to take place by 27 March.

Political talks have started this week and these will take place in parallel with the implementation of the legislative processes leading to the formation of the Assembly and Executive.

During this time our job, as civil servants, is to continue to deliver public services. We cannot determine political priorities nor do we have the authority to set a Budget. However, we will continue to deliver on previously agreed priorities until such times as political direction is given to change this position.

From our perspective one of the most difficult and pressing issues is the absence of the 2017/18 Budget as the Executive did not agree this before the Assembly was dissolved.

There is a small window of opportunity to allow a new Executive to agree a Budget and put it to the Assembly before the start of the new financial year, provided that agreement can be reached very quickly.

If the Budget is not agreed by the end of March the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance has limited powers under Section 59 of the Northern Ireland

Act 1998 to release cash to departments until such times as a budget is agreed and enshrined in legislation through a Budget Act. He will work with Permanent Secretaries on the NICS Board before exercising these powers.

This is a limited measure designed to ensure that funds flow to departments and our arms length bodies so that public services can continue to be provided and that public servants can continue to be paid. Our aim is to ensure 'business as usual' as far as possible though there will be some things we will not be able to do. For example, we will not be able to launch any new programmes, projects or policies which would require Ministerial or Executive endorsement. Departmental Accounting Officers will also have to be prudent and aim to avoid committing to new patterns of expenditure which would go beyond what they might reasonably expect to be allocated in a Budget for 2017/18 once this is agreed.

If you have any concerns about the impact of the financial situation on your area of work you should contact your finance business partner or finance division about how things will operate before a new Assembly and Executive is in place.

In the coming weeks we will continue to work on the draft Programme for Government and the supporting strategies to ensure that they are available for consideration by incoming Ministers. It is also important that we continue to look for ways to work across government and across sectors to deliver the best possible outcomes for the public.

We recognise that uncertainty is difficult to manage. However, we will keep you informed of developments over the next few weeks. In the meantime, we would like to thank you for your continued efforts and to ask you to continue to show the level of dedication and commitment to delivering public services that we have come to expect.

We remain totally committed to supporting the devolved institutions and the impending political discussions.



SIR MALCOLM McKIBBIN
Head of the Civil Service on behalf of the NICS Board