

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

Devolving policing and justice in Northern Ireland

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Peter Hain): Later today I will be introducing a Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill which will, amongst other things, pave the way for future devolution of policing and justice in Northern Ireland. I am introducing this enabling legislation now because I want to send out a clear message: I believe that responsibility for policing and justice in Northern Ireland should properly lie with a Northern Ireland Assembly, directly accountable to the people of Northern Ireland.

Devolution of policing and justice cannot happen until the Assembly is restored and requests devolution of these functions, and until Parliament agrees it. But although this may be some way off, it is important that we start discussing now, with all the parties, how devolution of policing and justice can work most effectively for the people of Northern Ireland.

We need to ensure that we are agreed on the model for the new department or departments. We need to develop a shared understanding of exactly what will be devolved and how it will operate. And we need to make sure that a future Northern Ireland Assembly has the tools they need to deliver policing and justice effectively, for example giving the Assembly the power to raise revenue for policing from a policing precept, as is the case in England, Scotland and Wales.

The discussion paper is intended to initiate and facilitate those discussions. It sets out what the Government believes is a sensible and pragmatic framework for policing and justice in Northern Ireland under an Assembly. It sets out which specific powers we think should be devolved and how these could operate. It also identifies particular areas where further thinking is needed.

The paper is not a blueprint but a discussion document. It is an opportunity for all those with an interest, but particularly the political parties in Northern Ireland, to

engage with the Government and, together, work out how devolution of policing and justice should work.

The Bill contains a number of provisions in addition to those providing for future devolution of policing and justice, including provisions relating to elections in Northern Ireland, a power to create a wholesale electricity market for the island of Ireland and provision to facilitate the funding of sustainable energy development in Northern Ireland.

The various policies in the Bill have been equality screened to assess whether they impact adversely on any of the nine equality groups in Northern Ireland. The assessment is that no such adverse impact arises. Steps are being taken to draw the Bill and the discussion paper to the attention of representative groups.

I am placing in the libraries copies of the Regulatory Impact Assessment prepared in relation to the single wholesale electricity provisions in the Bill, and of the Discussion paper.