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DRAFT PRESS RELEASELocal Government

Lord Dubs, Minister for the Environment, indicated today his further thinking on some issues in relation to local government which he had raised originally in a speech to the Annual Conference of the United Kingdom's Society of Local Authority Chief Executives in June. He announced that he would be bringing forward proposals for legislation to ensure that District Councils had the necessary power to manage and develop their own property.

Lord Dubs said that he was considering how district councils might be given an enhanced role in promoting the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas. He explained that there seemed to be some legal obstacles in the way of Councils exercising their roles in relation to local economic development. In particular, he saw a need to promote legislation which would clarify district councils' power to manage and develop their own property in pursuit of their local economic development objectives.

The Minister indicated that he was not suggesting a change in the present basic arrangements for the provision of local and regional services in Northern Ireland. Rather, he was seeking to ensure that district councils can complement or supplement the work of the various regional authorities and work more effectively in co-operation and partnership with local interests (including the business and community sectors) in addressing the social, economic and environmental needs of their districts. Lord Dubs said that he would be inviting comments from political parties, district councils and others on the proposals for legislation. He envisaged this matter would be taken forward in

conjunction with proposals for new legislation to extend and clarify some of DOE's urban regeneration powers.

Lord Dubs also announced that, having considered the responses to a consultation paper issued in January, the Government was proceeding with proposals to create a Planning Advisory Body. This new body will provide DOE with advice on strategic and policy issues in relation to its role as the Planning Authority in Northern Ireland. The Minister said that the new body would consist of up to 24 people with district councillors having around 12 places; the other members would be drawn from organisations with a close interest in planning matters.

Background

1. In his speech to the Solace Conference on 17 June 1997, Lord Dubs outline some possible initiatives in relation to local government in Northern Ireland. In particular, he spoke about the possibility of local authorities being given a general power to do what they consider appropriate in the interests of their district and its people. This concept has now been further refined as district councils having a role in "promoting the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas".
2. Some local authorities have, in particular, identified a possible weakness in their economic development powers to manage and develop (themselves or in partnership with others) land in their ownership.

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3. In January 1997, DOE published, for consultation, a paper about the possibility of creating a new body to assist the Department in the exercise of its strategic responsibilities under planning legislation.