

E. R.

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cc: PS/PUS (B&L)  
PS/Sir Ewart Bell  
NI Perm Secs  
Mr Brennan  
Mr Angel  
Mr Buxton  
Mr Gilliland  
Mr Merifield  
Mr Abbott  
Mr Coulson  
Mr Edis  
Mr Russell  
Mr Sullivan  
Mr Bickham

Mr Bourn

SINN FEIN

1. You have already seen the responses from Departments in regard to possible action to limit the facilities of Sinn Fein (apart from that of DOE, which I attach). I undertook to provide an assessment in a form suitable for inclusion in the forthcoming follow-up report to the Secretary of State.

2. There are two aspects:-

- (a) the scope for action against illegal occupation etc of property;
- (b) the scope for displacement of Sinn Fein's advice services by statutory or legitimate voluntary agencies.

Action against illegalities

3. About a dozen instances have been identified in which Sinn Fein advice centres are operating without proper title to the premises and/or planning permission. Where the premises are in public ownership (mainly the Housing Executive) it would be possible in theory to seek repossession. However in almost all cases the premises seem to have been carefully chosen so as not to have held up housing developments. Several of the premises are due for demolition shortly. There is only one case where repossession is actually required, and court action will be pursued. This will inevitably take time, and will be subject to the normal difficulties of enforcement in such areas.

4. Dispossession is a slow process, and by no means easy to implement. Even if successful the maximum net effect might only

be to enforce a change of location, for a centre which had been closed could readily re-open in a new location.

5. Enforcement difficulties have also inhibited action in the instances where planning permission has not been sought. It is also relevant that in most cases there would be no technical reason to refuse planning permission if it were sought - ie the use of the premises in question is compatible with the general development control policies for the areas concerned.

6. It appears that there would thus be little practical advantage in pursuing Sinn Fein on these fronts. Bearing in mind the enforcement difficulties, which could be severe, attempts which failed to achieve results could be counter-productive in drawing attention to the problem. Departments have however been reminded of the need to be vigilant for cases where Sinn Fein have appropriated public property and to consider in each instance whether there is any practical way in which their use could be terminated.

7. In regard to electricity supplies, Sinn Fein advice centres seem to be generally prepared to pay their electricity bills, and there is no scope for significant action on that front.

#### Alternatives to Sinn Fein

8. The scope for boosting legitimate alternatives to Sinn Fein in the advice and community support areas has been reviewed. The clear conclusion which emerges is that while increased support could well be useful and justified in its own right - and DHSS will shortly be submitting a policy paper to Mr Patten on this subject - it does not hold out much prospect of replacing the Sinn Fein activities. The main reasons for this are the almost limitless scope for welfare rights work and the skill and efficiency with which the Sinn Fein activities are conducted.

9. However, one specific area in which a degree of substitutions might be achieved is in the delivery of welfare services by DHSS, where the supply of information and advice could certainly be improved (not least in the single payments area of Supplementary Benefits which has received a good deal of attention from Sinn Fein) if manpower resources permitted. The opening later this

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year of a new Social Security office in Andersonstown will itself help the situation and provides a spring-board from which more could be done as and when manpower becomes available.

10. A modest start has already been made in earmarking 40 additional posts for an improved information service in DHSS (dependent on savings from computerisation) but a major effort would require a much larger input than current staffing limits could sustain.

Conclusion

11. I hope that paras 2 to 8 above will be suitable for your purposes. The largely negative conclusions are dispiriting but probably inevitable, and reflect the facts of the situation. My own view is that the only scope for significant action is in the DHSS staffing field, but even that would be uncertain of success (in terms of Sinn Fein displacement) and would undoubtedly be expensive. Nonetheless if the Secretary of State wished to press further on these points this would probably be the area to highlight.

12. Copy recipients will note the DOE's intention to reorganise the Area Officers Service, involving a withdrawal from local offices in West Belfast. This does not seem unreasonable in the absence of any evidence of significant use of these offices by the local public.

13. I would be grateful if Departments would note the request in para 6 above.

P. CARVILL  
Central Secretariat

30 January 1984

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