

From: Billy Gamble
Private Secretary

24 May 2000

Mr Semple	Mrs McAuley
Mr Loughran	Mrs McGivern
Mr McCusker	Mrs Kenny
Mr Haire	Mr Vincent
Mr Gray	Dr P Smyth
Mr Lavery	Mr Esdale
Mr May	Mr Logue
Mr Canavan	Mr Larkin*
Mr Cameron	Mr Barrington*
Mr McCartney	Dr Gudgin
Mr T Smyth	Mr Kerr*
Mrs Devlin	Mr Campbell*
Mrs Flanagan	Mrs Armstong
Mr McKervill	Ms Quinn
Ms M Smith	Ms Roulston

**unable to attend*

OFM/DFM AWAYDAY 17/18 MAY: NOTE FOR THE RECORD

The purpose of the 'awayday' was to:

- (a) take forward the issues identified at the first Project Board meeting on 5 April;
- (b) reflect on the major issues and the individual papers produced;
- (c) agree proposals to be put to Ministers for implementation;
- (d) establish linkages to the Departmental planning process; and
- (e) agree how to take forward the project.

2 This note provides a record of the main points of discussion and agreement reached.

Experience of Devolution

3 The session began with a snapshot of individual and collective experiences of devolution. Overall the experience was generally positive with local Ministers taking a greater role than direct rule Ministers. Under direct rule the balance of knowledge lay with officials, but with devolution local Ministers had a greater knowledge of the issues. The introduction of special advisers had added a new dimension to the process; one that was different from that previously experienced by staff. Devolution also brought cultural differences in the way business was conducted. For example, getting work transacted through Ministers was generally slower than under direct rule. The decision-making process was more complex and protracted. This, in part, reflected the shared nature of the offices of FM and DFM and the requirement for them jointly to approve substantive decisions.

4 The period was characterised by a huge increase in the volume of papers generated, particularly in relation to the Executive Committee. This '*paper rush*' placed an enormous burden on both officials and Ministers. Ministers (and advisers) were of the view that events were '*running Ministers*' and that not enough quality time was available for Ministers to think strategically. All were agreed that there was a need to ease that burden and introduce new methods of operating to make the system work better and help the decision-making process.

5 On the legislative front, devolution had brought an increased workload, new areas of work, pressures on timescales, and higher expectations in respect of legislation. There was also high levels of interaction with the Assembly staff through plenary debates, Assembly questions and committees.

6 The Executive Information Service for its part faced new and much more demanding challenges in developing media programmes for 14 Ministers who were around 4 ½ days a week. These were pressures on the EIS that did not arise under direct rule.

7 Devolution offered the opportunity of creating something quite new: an opportunity to develop a corporate centre for the Northern Ireland administration. This in turn impacted upon the representation role of the Northern Ireland Bureau (Washington) giving greater focus and proactivity to its role.

8 OFM/DFM needed to be conscious of the implications of its central position and the demands that that placed on other departments. EPU needed to take care in the discharge of its duties: policy should be made by the relevant department. OFM/DFM also needed to be conscious that other Departments perceive it as being well endowed with staff - *'it gets all that it wants'* - at a time when other departments are feeling the pinch.

Environmental Scan

9 The paper provided a broad contextual basis for the main discussion and set out some of the major challenges that Government will face in the next few years. It was agreed that public expenditure pressures would leave very little headroom to initiate new programmes and little scope to increase capacity to meet the demands associated with devolution. The limited room to manoeuvre on manpower and resources generally would require us to work differently. In short, hard choices lay ahead against a backdrop of increased public expectation and Ministers who, in pre-election mode, will be anxious to see demonstrable gains on the ground.

Key Relationships

(a) Relationships with the Assembly

10 There was agreement that an official level liaison group comprising staff from the Machinery of Government and Executive Committee Secretariats, the Assembly Business Office, private secretaries and special advisers of FM/DFM and the Speaker should meet regularly to discuss forthcoming business and any potential difficulties. There was also support for an Executive Committee Minister or the 2 junior Ministers, supported by officials in OFM/DFM, having responsibility for co-ordinating and prioritising Executive Committee business in the Assembly. This role would be analogous to a Leader of the House.

11 In addition, there was support for the idea of a protocol on procedures to be followed on handling questions and related matters. Officials in OFM/DFM would co-ordinate with other Departments and follow up the idea with the Assembly.

12 The inadequacies of the current Standing Orders were also highlighted. For example, the Standing Orders were not compatible with the Northern Ireland Act and there was no provision in them to allow for the withdrawal of Bills introduced in the Assembly that were overtaken

by events during suspension. If there were a resumption of Devolution there would be a very short period of some 5/6 weeks before recess and little chance of any meaningful business being concluded except under the accelerated procedure. Although Bills can be carried over it would only take one MLA to dissent and the Bills would fall.

13 There was a short discussion about the 'policy development' function of the Assembly Committees, as envisaged under Strand 1 paragraph 9 of the GFA. Clearly this had caused tension between the legislature and the executive. Committees can of course initiate legislation, but policy responsibility rests with Departments. There was broad support for the suggestion that OFM/DFM should give the Committee of the Centre a pre-introductory scrutiny role for draft Bills.

(b) Decision Making

14 There was general agreement for the proposals contained in the paper on 'Decision Making' which aimed to find new ways of working and provide for more efficient decision making. Essentially, the key points of the paper highlighted the need to manage better the number of submissions to Ministers and ensure that the views of officials and special advisers were adequately reflected in them.

15 There was general agreement that it would be better if meetings of the Executive Committee were moved to Thursdays, thus avoiding the regular Monday and Tuesday plenary business of the Assembly. If the meeting were fortnightly it would certainly ease the '*paper rush*' experienced by Ministers associated with weekly meetings. It was also suggested that we should seek to conduct a number of the Executive Committee meetings outside Belfast in a bid to make devolved Government more visible and meaningful for people.

16 The point was made by the First Minister's side that Mr Trimble would only agree to a shift to fortnightly meetings if, as a *quid pro quo*, Executive Committee members provided a weekly briefing note on major issues within their Departments. Mr Loughran stressed that the sharing of information was absolutely fundamental if we were to persuade people that devolved Government was coherent. If it was not seen to be working together it would be a turn off. It was important, therefore, that the publicity and PR was properly handled.

17 There was support for the suggestion that the Ministerial Representatives Group should look at the agenda for the Executive

Committee meetings 3 or 4 meetings ahead and that they should be given responsibility for agreeing the outline agenda for the forthcoming meeting, 10 days ahead.

(c) Supporting Ministers in OFM/DFM

18 In examining how we can support Ministers better, there was a wide ranging discussion about the role of special advisers and junior Ministers, the private office support structure and the need for overall strategic direction. Here again there was general agreement on the papers that were circulated.

19 There were a number of elements to those papers. First, the idea of a weekly meeting of the four Ministers with senior officials and advisers to review progress, set priorities and agree a future work programme. Second, to agree that advisers should be involved in the early policy development stage of papers being drawn up by officials. This would ensure that papers going forward to Ministers adequately reflect the views of advisers, including any points of divergence, and offer suggestions for dealing with areas of disagreement. Third, there should be greater clarity in respect of the roles of junior Ministers. It is suggested that they should have full authority over matters in their designated area except where the issue is to go before one of the institutions or is a matter over which FM/DFM wish to retain specific responsibility. If that is agreed by FM/DFM then papers can be cleared through whichever Minister(s) is/are responsible.

20 There was a short discussion on the paper setting out the proposed new arrangements for the OFM/DFM private office once devolution is resumed. The new construct has been designed to improve the processes and systems, adapt smarter working practices and provide clarity and focus on action commissioned by the private office. The core of the new set-up was a 'duty clerk' system operating from an outer private office. The role of the duty clerk was to move paper quickly around the system.

21 The point was made that it was important that the new arrangements had sufficient in-built flexibility to avoid unnecessary bottlenecks in the processing of papers.

22 It was clear that the physical dislocation of the Department from the FM and DFM had caused difficulties during the period of devolution and had disrupted the service to Ministers. It was suggested that Ministers might consider spending part of the week in Castle Buildings conducting

business sessions with officials. This would be a precursor to a possible move to Stormont Castle once it is refurbished (subject to the Secretary of State's agreement).

23 There was a discussion about the name of the Department from which it was clear that the 'Office of' didn't really capture the essence of its role. It was suggested that there was merit in re-branding the Department. The two alternatives mentioned were the Department of the Executive/or Centre.

24 Finally, in progressing the business of OFM/DFM it was important not to lose sight of the expectations of the public. This applied particularly to policy areas for which the Department was responsible. For example, the voluntary and community sectors had a particular focus in relation to *new TSN*.

Role, Mission and Vision

25 The syndicate exercises opened up a discussion on the role and nature of OFM/DFM, the sort of vision, mission and the types of behaviours that one would wish to see in the Department. Interestingly there was total agreed that a significant amount of change was required by OFM/DFM to meet the demands of Devolution – on a scale of 0-10 a the scale of change was put at 8.

26 The output of the final session has been distilled under headings to try to capture constituent elements of the emerging mission, value set and guiding principles that might give strategic direction to OFM/DFM. A worked-up version of what that might mean for the Department is attached at Annex A. Comments on the Annex are requested by 9 June to allow a final version to be produced for clearance by the Project Board at its June meeting.

27 In summary, there was broad agreement that the role (or purpose) of the Department was to give leadership and to support the institutions established by the Good Friday Agreement. It should do this by taking forward work under three broad areas: equality, the Economic Policy Unit and the overall co-ordination of Government business. It was felt also that it was important for it to implement the Programme for Government, bring coherence to Government and demonstrate that the devolved Government actually makes a difference to people.

28 There was general agreement that the Department should be open, accountable and committed to e-Government

29 In order to provide a central leadership role it was important to build strong ties between departments and develop a sense of corporacy. That would require the sharing of information, particularly were the Executive Committee meetings to be moved to fortnightly basis.

30 As for possible values the following were suggested for the Department.

- *valuing the contribution of staff*
- *striving for professionalism*
- *leading by example*
- *commitment to Investors in People*
- *teamworking*
- *creating a climate for ideas and innovation*
- *encouraging flexibility/avoiding rigidity and hierarchical approaches*

Taking the Project Forward

31 A number of specific actions were agreed.

- (i) Mr Semple would offer a submission to devolved Ministers on their return to summarise the main outcomes of the exercise '*to establish the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister as a department.*' **[Action: Mr May/Mr Gamble to draft]** Ministers would be invited to comment on the proposals to deal with the 'rubbing' points that have been identified.
- (ii) Senior management should brief staff on the OFM/DFM 'awayday' when they return to their offices. **[Action: everyone]**
- (iii) Mr Semple should send a note a note to staff in OFM/DFM to bring them up to speed on the project. **[Action: Mr May/Mr Gamble to draft]**

32 Were devolution to resume the importance of the project only rises in significance. It was essential that the work initiated should be carried through. With that in mind, it was agreed that the Project Board would meet in June. In the meantime, the role and vision of the Department would be circulated for comment with a view to receiving 'sign-off' in

June. The process had advanced sufficiently to enable the Department's business planning to be designed and initiated.

33 Questions relating to the resourcing of the project would be addressed as a matter of urgency. In this context, Mr Cameron offered to make available a secondee from NIE.

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ANNEX A

DRAFT MISSION STATEMENT, VALUES AND MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Mission Statement

The mission of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister is to support its Ministers and the institutions of Government and to take forward three key policy areas: equality and human rights, the development of a coherent Programme of Government setting out the Executive's overall aims and ensuring its implementation, and the co-ordination of the business of Government.

The key roles of the Department are:

- *to support the institutions established under the GFA*
- *to demonstrate that devolved Government makes a positive difference to the people of Northern Ireland*
- *to promote the equality and human rights agenda*

OFM/DFM has a strong central role

- *providing strategic leadership, drive and innovation*
- *promoting and building corporacy and cohesion across Government*
- *facilitating the overall business of the Executive Committee, including by maximising consensus*

Values

The following value statements represent the set of beliefs that define our organisational behaviour:

- *respect for diversity, internally among staff and externally*
- *develop partnerships*
- *open to new ideas and adaptive to change*
- *open and honest communication*
- *conduct our business with integrity*
- *respect for customers' values, principles and opinions*
- *continuously strive for improvement in the quality of our service*
- *value the contributions of staff*

Management Principles

The following statements of principle reflect our management practices:

- *encourage a flexible team-based approach and avoid rigidity and hierarchical approaches*
- *empower staff to do their best through support for their continuous improvement and development*
- *seek to implement new ideas by encourage innovative ideas from staff*
- *encourage and foster close working relationships and partnerships with other departments and external organisations*
- *seek to build consensus and develop a corporate approach in our dealings with departments*
- *seek to harness creative energies through progressive leadership*
- *value the contributions of staff*
- *strive for efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources*