

Office of the First Minister
and Deputy First Minister

EXC/31/00

2115

24 MAR 2000

Block A, Castle Buildings, Stormont Estate, Belfast BT4 3SG
Tel: 028 90528420 Fax: 028 90528427

FROM: ROSALIE FLANAGAN

DATE: 24 March 2000

TO: JOAN CASSELLS

cc Mr McCusker

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

1. Pat Carvill has been receiving the attached letters from Permanent Secretaries on their experiences of devolution. You were checking whether there was any others in the system. Most of the letters refer to the late receipt of Executive papers.
2. Tony would like us to draft a note for John Semple to Pat Carvill addressing the issue on the basis of
 - The scale of the work undertaken in those 2 months
 - The newness of the situation
 - The fact that most of the papers considered were drawn up by the Executive Committee Secretariat itself, rather than by Departments,
 - Our need to clear papers with 2, rather than 1, Ministers
 - The "double burden" we were therefore carrying, both producing and issuing the papers.
3. I should be grateful if you would do some analysis of the Executive Committee papers over the 2 months.

On a paper by paper basis, you might look at

- Who produced it ✓
- The length of the paper
- For OFMDFM papers only, when it was first put to Ministers for clearance
- When it was received as a cleared paper for issue by the Secretariat 150
- Whether external factors influenced the timing (for example, the BIC/BIIGC papers were not received by us until a few days before the meetings) ?
- Other relevant specific information

On a meeting by meeting basis, you might set out

- The number of papers
- When they were issued
- How they were issued
- Whether any particular paper delayed the issue of others
- What steps were taken progressively over the weeks to improve things

5. When you have completed the research, we can consider with Tony the form of a submission to Pat Carvil.

Rosalie Flanagan

ROSALIE FLANAGAN

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IMPACT OF DEVOLUTION

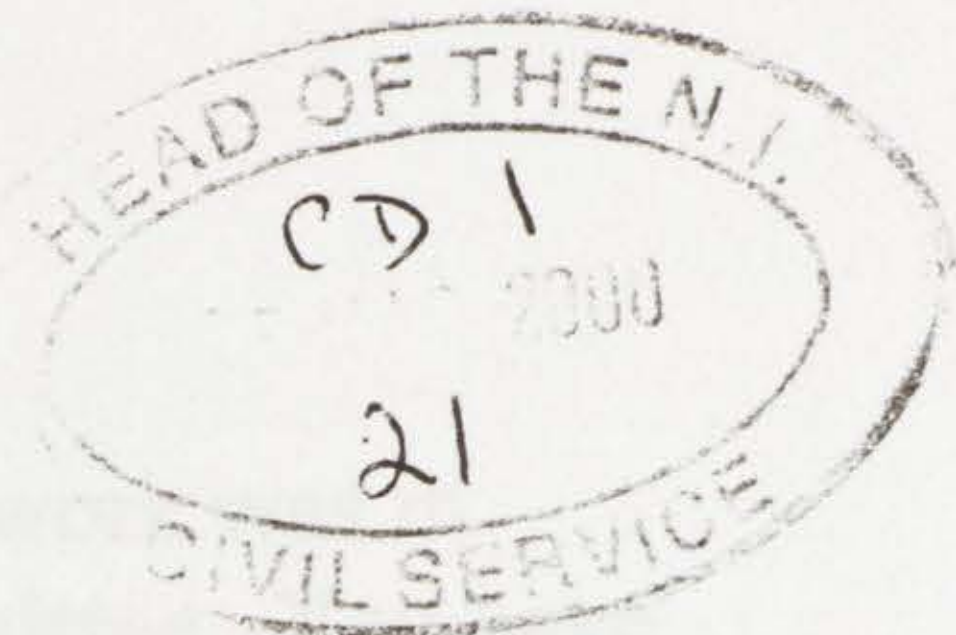
In your letter of 21 February to Ronnie Spence, you raised concerns about the impact of devolution on the Department. I have asked the Department to prepare a paper which might help set the background and indeed the agenda for further consideration of this subject.

I would have to confess that, despite careful planning, we seriously underestimated the impact of devolution across the Department. In our situation, this was certainly exacerbated by the fact that we had a very high profile Minister who attracted huge media interest and also interest within the Assembly from a number of particular individuals and parties. You might like to know that during the 9 weeks, we dealt with 2 Adjournment Debates (in successive weeks), 50 Assembly Questions and over 520 Private Office Queries. The Private Office Queries were four times the rate during the comparable period last year. We therefore had to strengthen our Private Office, our Information Office and we set up what we called a Machinery of Government Branch headed at Grade 7 to handle all the procedures associated with the Minister, Assembly and North/South issues etc. I should also say that as well as a very significant increase in quantity, devolution had a material impact in terms of what I might call level of alertness. That involved the publicity dimension surrounding our Minister, relationships between the Department and his party machine, and also relationships with the Assembly Education Committee. It was reassuring that our Minister on a number of public occasions complimented the support he had received within the Department, both in his Private Office and the supporting Civil Servants.

HAMILTON
PERMANENT SECRETARY

Department of Education

1794
- 7 MAR 2000



6/3/00
Mr P Carvill CB
Permanent Secretary
Department of Finance and Personnel
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
BT19 7NR

M^r M^r Cusker

na
2 March 2000

Dear Pat,

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H. J. J. J.
note
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IMPACT OF DEVOLUTION

In your letter of 21 February to Ronnie Spence, you invited comments from colleagues which might help set the background and indeed the agenda for further consideration of this subject.

I would have to confess that, despite careful planning, we seriously underestimated the impact of devolution across the Department. In our situation, this was certainly exacerbated by the fact that we had a very high profile **Minister** who attracted huge media interest and also interest within the Assembly from a number of particular individuals and parties. You might like to know that during the 9 weeks, we dealt with 2 Adjournment Debates (in successive weeks), 50 Assembly Questions and over 520 Private Office Queries. The Private Office Queries were four times the rate during the comparable period last year. We therefore had to strengthen our Private Office, our Information Office and we set up what we called a Machinery of Government Branch headed at Grade 7 to handle all the procedures associated with the Minister, Assembly, and North/South issues etc. I should also say that as well as a very significant increase in quantum, devolution had a material impact in terms of what I might call level of alertness. That involved the publicity dimension surrounding our Minister, relationships between the Department and his party machine, and also relationships with the Assembly Education Committee. It was re-assuring that our Minister on a number of public occasions complimented the support he had received within the Department, both in his Private Office and the supporting Divisions.

The second area which caused us considerable additional work was in providing information to the **Assembly Education Committee**. You have already heard me commenting at our Permanent Secretaries meeting on our experiences with the Committee. On a weekly basis, we were asked for information, on a number of occasions at 24/48 hours notice. In the interests of trying to establish good relationships, we worked hard to provide the information although it was not always possible. The Committee, certainly in its early days, had little appreciation of the demands on staff in providing that information. I am bound to say that with a change in Committee Clerk towards the end of the period, we began to establish much more sensible and realistic deadlines for such information. The nature of the information being requested had considerable impact particularly around Grade 7/Deputy Principal level since it was at that level of operation and responsibility that information was relevant.

The third area which I would like to highlight concerned preparations for the weekly meetings of the **Executive Committee**. This certainly had a quite significant impact on myself and my senior colleagues, primarily because of the lateness of delivery of papers for the Executive Committee. Without exception, they were delivered late on a Friday afternoon, which meant weekend working so that our Minister could have both the Executive Committee papers and appropriate briefing on the following Monday morning. The difficulty here is that inevitably some of the issues required consultation with other colleagues in the Department and also access to Departmental papers. I believe that this needs to be looked at seriously to produce a much more efficient and effective set of procedures and timescales in future.

The fourth area of significant impact for us was in **North/South** areas of co-operation. As you know, we have had close links with colleagues in Dublin for a number of years and so the preparation of joint papers was something which, although time consuming, was not difficult for us. The difficulty came in the handling of those papers outside the Department and I have to say that we spent a considerable amount of time in discussion with staff in the North/South Joint Secretariat. Had the Secretariat issued, for example, a detailed template in the early stages, this would have helped to overcome some of the problems. The outworking of agreements at NSMC will also have considerable impact on staff across the range of areas.

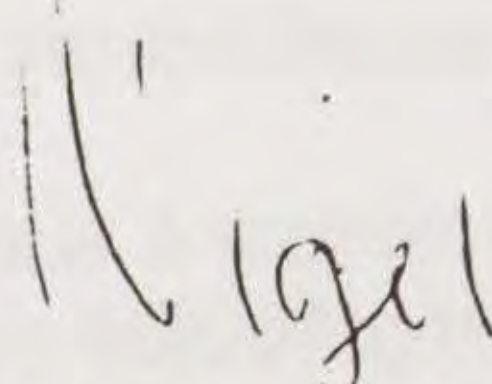
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We also had what I might best describe as the **international** dimension to our work. The Minister was very keen to strengthen the relationships, for example, with the United States and as a result of our visit there, we are now engaged in a range of further issues. The Minister was also keen to strengthen his relationships in England, Scotland and Wales, and would have wanted to strengthen relationships with the OECD and also the European Union in due course. I have to say that I fully supported and encouraged these developments since devolution would provide opportunity to develop particular strategies and policies for Northern Ireland.

I hope you can see from this rather brief summary that resourcing the Minister and all the institutions had a huge impact on our staff, particularly on **workload and priorities**. I have no doubt that when we evaluate our Departmental Business Plan at the end of March, a number of targets will have been missed, simply because of the impact of devolution. I am equally in no doubt that when the institutions are restored, we need a Programme of Government which will determine priorities for all staff within the Department and which would influence our Business Planning processes. It would also be my judgement that the early significant increases, for example, in Private Office Queries and Assembly Questions would reduce somewhat but would also be replaced by more substantive involvement in policy issues, legislation and external consultations/representation. To be absolutely blunt, we were stretched to the limits and I am in no doubt whatsoever that we should use that experience during the period of suspension to reflect on staffing and resource implications. I would also say, finally, that when the institutions are restored, Ministers, Members of the Assembly and the Assembly Committees will want to get straight back into work and they certainly will not, in my view, tolerate any bureaucratic excuses for inability to deliver the necessary support and information which they will certainly demand.

I hope this is of some help to you. We would certainly be more than willing to discuss this with you or your staff.

Yours sincerely

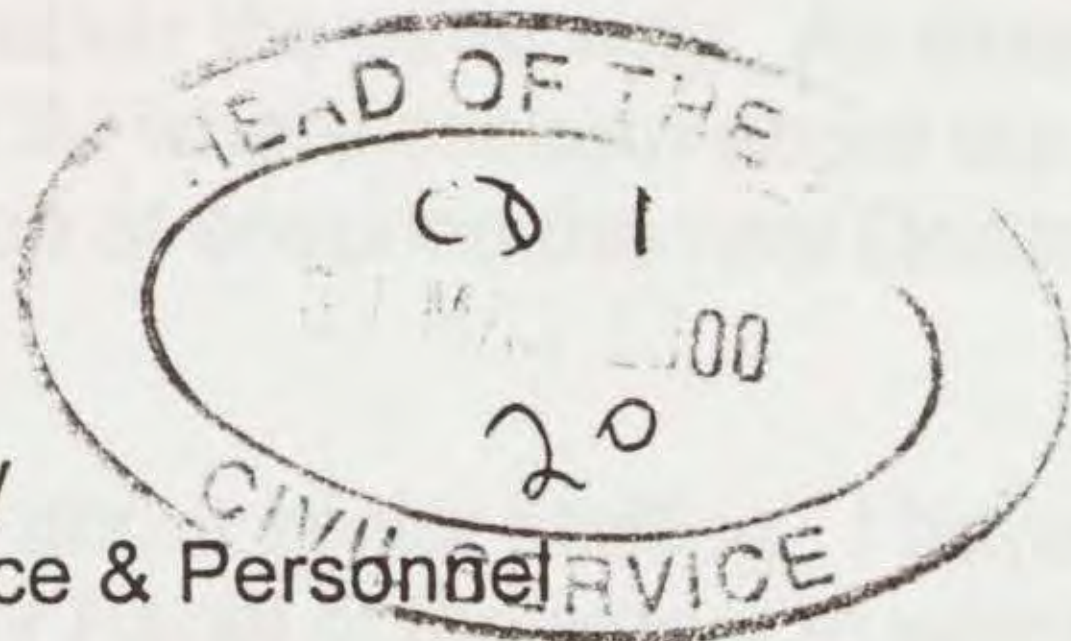


NIGEL HAMILTON

cc **PS/Mr Semple**
Permanent Secretaries

21 February 2000

Mr Pat Carvill CB
Permanent Secretary
Department of Finance & Personnel
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
BT19 7NA



DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER
& FURTHER EDUCATION,
TRAINING & EMPLOYMENT

1796
- 7 MAR 2000

hc PS/Mr Semple
NI Permanent Secretaries
Mrs Flanagan

04 M^r M^r Carver
6/3/
Carver me got all
the papers on this
17/3

Dear Pat,

IMPACT OF DEVOLUTION

I am responding to the invitation to comment contained in your reply of 21 February to Ronnie Spence.

Like other Departments we found that the task of servicing the new democratic machinery during the period of devolution stretched our existing resources and structures to the limit. The Private Office, the Co-ordination Unit, the Economic and Statistics Unit and the Education Divisions were particularly badly affected. The Private Office managed through the heroic efforts of several key individuals, and some urgent reinforcement in numbers. In other areas, however, we had got to the point where normal work had virtually ceased.

The difficulty which any review will face, however, is that it is impossible to know the extent to which the pattern of the early weeks was likely to continue. There was certainly some evidence of an easement in the number of invitations which our Minister was accepting and in the number of hours in the week he was willing to work. On the other hand Assembly Members and our Assembly Committee were only moving into second gear and I have no doubt that the demands of the North/South and East/West Agendas were likely to place substantial additional burdens on us.

I note your comment that there is a problem of grade drift. I do not know the basis for this but I have felt for some time that if Government wants us to be more innovative and strategic, more a purchaser of services than a supplier of services, then the traditional hierarchical nature of our grading structure needs re-examining.

There is a further dimension to all of this. This Department, like three others, is not simply adjusting to cope with the need to support the democratic structures, it is also establishing itself as a new Department with the necessary infrastructure. As an Accounting Officer I believe it is essential to have effective Finance and Personnel Divisions, and I have no doubt you would support that proposition. We have been greatly assisted in the task by our colleagues in DETI and DE but I have been struck by how little support we have been offered from the centre – if anything the flow of



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

information has been rather the other way. An example of this is the hesitancy in offering us a seat at EOM where concern about the size of the meeting seems to outweigh the importance of ensuring the new Departments are brought up to speed as quickly as possible.

Finally, some thoughts about senior staffing. I have been struck, during my first experiences of Advisory Panel of the extent to which senior staffing issues create frustration, bad feeling and protracted correspondence between colleagues whose energies might be better devoted to other things. I also find it somewhat unsatisfactory that while I am apparently trusted by the centre to administer a budget of some £600m a year, I do not have the freedom to decide whether a post in my department should be Grade 5 rather than Grade 6. This is not how Whitehall Departments work and I wonder if we could not devise some more sensible arrangements.

Yours sincerely



ALAN SHANNON
Permanent Secretary

Department for



Regional Development

From the
Permanent Secretary

P Carvill Esq CB
Department of Finance & Personnel
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
Co Down

Clarence Court
10-18 Adelaide Street
BELFAST
BT2 8GB
Telephone:
Facsimile:
Email:

Your reference:
Our reference: PSE 106/00
17 February 2000



✓ Mrs Moore
✓ 21/2 Mr K. Miller
✓ Mr Ferguson

Dear *Pat*

IMPACT OF DEVOLUTION

I am writing to follow up my comments at this week's Permanent Secretary's meeting about the need to examine the impact of devolution on staff levels at senior level.

At the end of the first 72 days of devolution, we were close to breaking point in meeting the needs of the new arrangements and those needs showed every sign of increasing rather than stabilising or declining. We could not have continued at the same pace with nearly everyone at senior level being under intense pressure and working very long hours. There were already some cases of stress and health problems.

I have made a crude attempt at assessing what additional staff resources would have been required in DRD and it amounts to 2 or 3 extra Grade 5s and 5 to 10 extra Grade 7s. Heaven knows where we would have found the money, let alone the people. Those who would advocate reprioritising work, delegating more work to lower levels or seeking a Ministerial decision to drop some activities would, I sense, have found their heads connecting with a brick wall!

I am sure that most, if not all, Departments will have faced similar pressures.

It will be tempting now to sit back and wait until we see whether suspension will last for some time before attempting to address this matter. I believe that this would be wrong and, if suspension ends, it would be grossly unfair to our staff to expect them to return to the same level of intensive working without any realistic prospect of early relief.

17/02/00 11:45

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Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
Co Down
BT19 7NA

From Pat Carvill CB
Permanent Secretary

cc PS/Mr Semple
NI Perm Secs
Mrs Moore
Mr K Millar

FROM: PAT CARVILL
DATE: 21 FEBRUARY 2000
TO: MR SPENCE

IMPACT OF DEVOLUTION

1. Thank you for your note.
2. I agree with the gist of your comments. Reflecting on the staffing impact will be an important part of the "lesson drawing" process, and I agree that the Scottish experience in particular will be worth looking at. I have put a line out to Edinburgh with a view to a fact-finding visit. I will discuss your other proposals with Carol and Ken, and will circulate some ideas.
3. Might I suggest that there could be at least one break in the brick wall to which you refer? Grade drift is part of our problem, and we need to be resolute in tackling it. One element of this is managing expectations, eg on the part of departmental committees; another part is staff development. Neither is easy; but I agree with you that the "straightforward" solution of throwing more people and money at the problem is unlikely to be feasible, so we will have to look for alternatives.

Telephone: 028 9185 8166 Fax: 028 9185 8184
E.Mail: pat.carvill@dfpni.gov.uk

4. I would be interested in any further comments that colleagues may have to offer.

Pat Carvill

PAT CARVILL