

CENTRAL PERSONNEL GROUP  
NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL SERVICE

MANAGEMENT AND PERSONAL

26 OCT 1998

DF/40/10

cc: Mr Ferguson  
Mr McCusker  
Mrs Brown  
Mr Sweeney

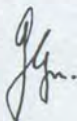
FROM: J G HUNTER  
DATE: 5 OCTOBER 1998  
TO: MR SEMPLE

SUPPORT TEAM FOR THE FIRST AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTERS

In view of the cancellation of this mornings meeting, I wish to indicate my support for the conclusions reached by David Ferguson in his minute of 2 October. It makes sense to me to convert the Support Team to a Shadow Executive Committee Secretariat, with the prospect ultimately of a merger with Central Secretariat.

While it would be attractive to seek to clarify the roles and duties of the various parties described in David Ferguson's minute, I believe that it is unrealistic to expect to do so not least because of the ambiguity of the role to be played by the Special Advisers in the First Ministers Office. However, I agree with David that there would be merit in him continuing to discharge line management responsibility for the Private Offices. This is something which you might discuss with David Lavery on his appointment.

Finally, I am conscious that the Deputy First Minister was keen to move on the appointment of his own Principal Private Secretary once parallel arrangements had been set in place for Mr Trimble. If it was possible for Mr Mallon to clear the draft job description before he goes to America, we could reduce the length of time the appointment is likely to require.



JOHN HUNTER

MANAGEMENT AND PERSONAL

FROM: DAVID FERGUSON  
2 OCTOBER 1998

cc Mr Hunter  
Mr McCusker  
Mrs Brown  
Mr Sweeney

- opening note for FM/DFM  
- work prog. for Executive Committee Secretariat

Mr Semple

## SUPPORT TEAM FOR THE FIRST AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTERS

- Issue:** Future of the Support Team arrangements.
- Timing:** Pressing. Before your planned meetings with Messrs Trimble and Mallon on the role of special advisers and PPSs.
- Action:** For consideration and, if you wish, discussion, and then factoring in to your planned meetings for clarification and agreement.

### Introduction

1. We have spoken on a number of occasions in recent weeks about the Support Team arrangements, how they have operated over the summer months and how they might develop over the remainder of the period leading up to devolution. As I mentioned in the margins of Monday morning's prayers, I thought it would be useful if I put some thoughts down on paper. I am afraid that in doing so, I will go over some well-known territory; but I think it important to sketch in the contextual background.

### The Original Concept

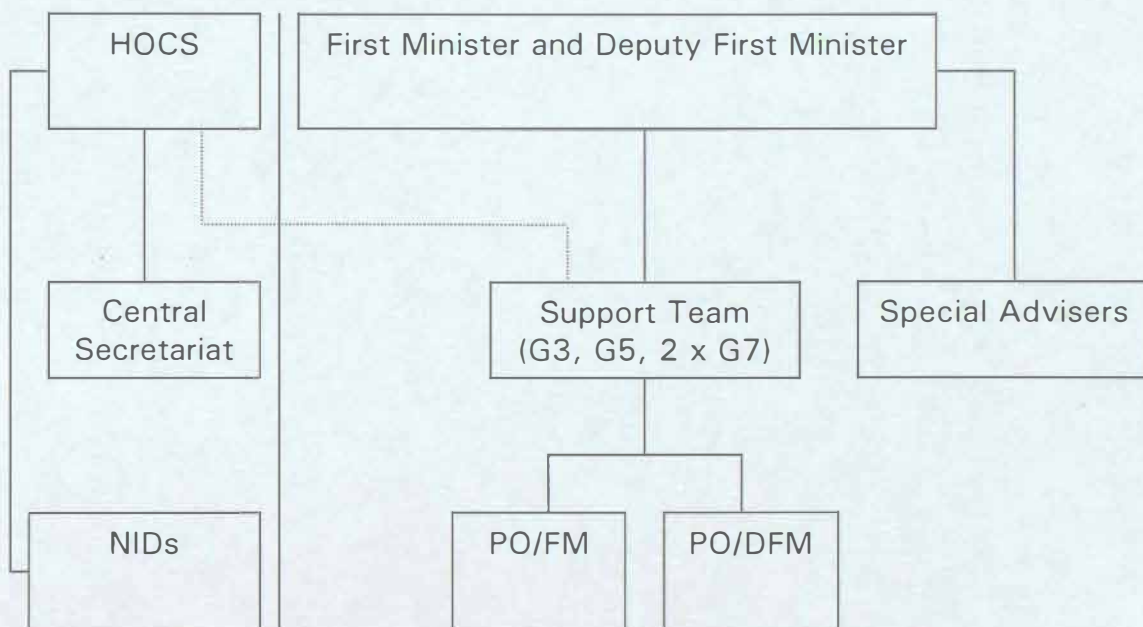
2. It was originally anticipated that a small team of officials would be established (by the grace and favour of the Secretary of State) to support the First and Deputy First Ministers during the shadow period of the new Northern Ireland Assembly. The team would remain within the NICS and so ultimately be responsible to the Secretary of State, but its members would work on a day to day basis for the First and Deputy First Ministers.
3. The team itself would consist of a Leader (old G3 level), Deputy (old G5), 2 Grade 7s and some administrative support staff. In broad

terms they would act as the interface for communications to and from the Assembly, Northern Ireland Departments and their current Ministers and all other interested parties, including the Governments in London and Dublin. In specific terms, the Leader's duties would include:

- ◆ planning and directing the work of the First and Deputy First Ministers' Support Team;
  - ◆ briefing the First and Deputy First Ministers on machinery of government and other key issues;
  - ◆ the lead role in assisting the Ministers in the preparation of relevant work programmes and ensuring their efficient running;
  - ◆ ensuring that the views and objectives of the First and Deputy First Ministers are conveyed effectively and clearly to the Assembly and other bodies as appropriate;
  - ◆ taking the lead in assisting the Ministers to prepare for meetings of the Assembly and other institutional arrangements established under the Agreement;
  - ◆ alerting the First and Deputy First Ministers to any potential problems or competing objectives; and
  - ◆ acting as secretary to high level committees.
4. The job specifications of the G5 and the 2 G7s were cast in broadly similar terms, although the trawl notices for the posts indicated that over time during the shadow period the G5 and one of the G7s could expect to take on the role of Private Secretary to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister respectively.
5. Separately from the team, but operating alongside it, the Secretary of State also agreed to the appointment of one special adviser for each of the 2 Ministers (subsequently increased to 2, and latterly 3 each). The role and responsibilities of the advisers was carefully based on GB practice and on the provisions of the Civil Service Order. In broad terms by normal convention they are expected to advise the Minister who appoints them on the development of policy and its effective presentation. In specific terms, their contract provides for them to carry out such of the following duties as their Minister may require:
- ◆ reviewing papers as they go to the Minister, ensuring among other things that sensitive political points are handled properly;

- ◆ checking facts and research findings;
- ◆ preparing speculative policy papers for the Minister;
- ◆ contributing to policy planning;
- ◆ liaising with Parties;
- ◆ helping to brief Assembly members and officials on policy issues;
- ◆ liaising with outside interest groups;
- ◆ speech writing and related research; and
- ◆ providing expert advice as a specialist in a particular field.

6. In overall organisational terms, the original model of support looked as follows:



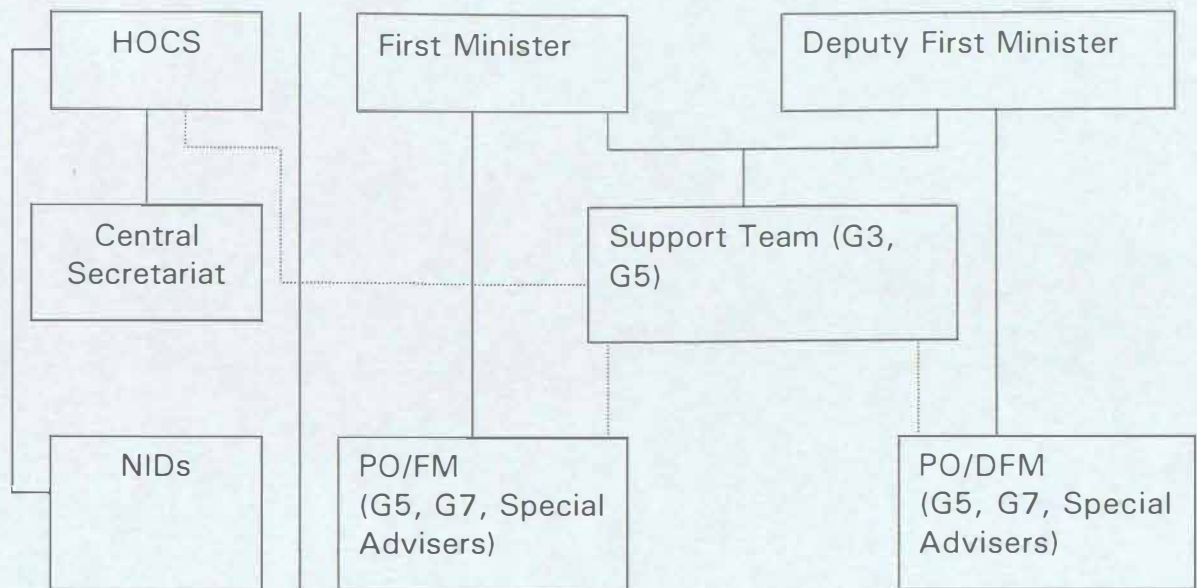
**Experience to Date**

7. As you know, practice has not followed theory in a number of ways. First, Mr Trimble (asked for a Private Secretary from the outset and arrangements were put in hand to identify and appoint the 2 Grade 7s originally destined for the Support Team (not the G5 and one of the G7s) as dedicated personal staff. The process was completed at the beginning of this month and cover was provided by temporary

appointees at a lower grade in the meantime. The job description of the 2 permanent appointees needs to be reviewed as a result.

8. Second, Mr Trimble sought (and continues to seek) to model his Private Office on No. 10 by designating the first of his special advisers as Chief of Staff and the second as Director of Information and by appointing a career official as a Principal Private Secretary. Mr Mallon, too, has asked for a PPS.
9. I am not clear on where we have get to on revising and defining roles and responsibilities for the postholders; but drafts that I have seen prompt confusion, at least in my mind, about the amount of overlap between the Chief of Staff and the PPS in Mr Trimble's office and between both of them and the remaining members of the Support Team (Paul Sweeny and me). The draft job description for the PPS in particular is virtually identical to mine, save only that it is directed towards providing support for a single Minister (the FM or DFM) rather than both of them.
10. The third and most significant departure from theory has been Mr Trimble's general unhappiness with the originally proposed arrangements, his de facto insistence, as demonstrated by his appointments and designations, on having dedicated personal staff right up to senior level, and his determination to keep the Support Team at a distance. Mr Mallon, on the other hand, has appeared content with the arrangements and has been operating them broadly in the way we had anticipated.
11. I should perhaps add that, notwithstanding the difficulties, a considerable amount of work has been done at the practical level in putting in place the necessary administrative support structures and systems from scratch and at the policy level in providing support (papers, briefing, speech material and so on) on a range of business issues, including in particular the matters referred by the Secretary of State (Departmental structures, North/South co-operation, the BIC and the Civic Forum). That work is continuing, albeit for the moment on direct drive with the DFM and, separately, on indirect drive with the FM.

12. Taken together, the practical experience of the summer months has produced an emerging model as follows:



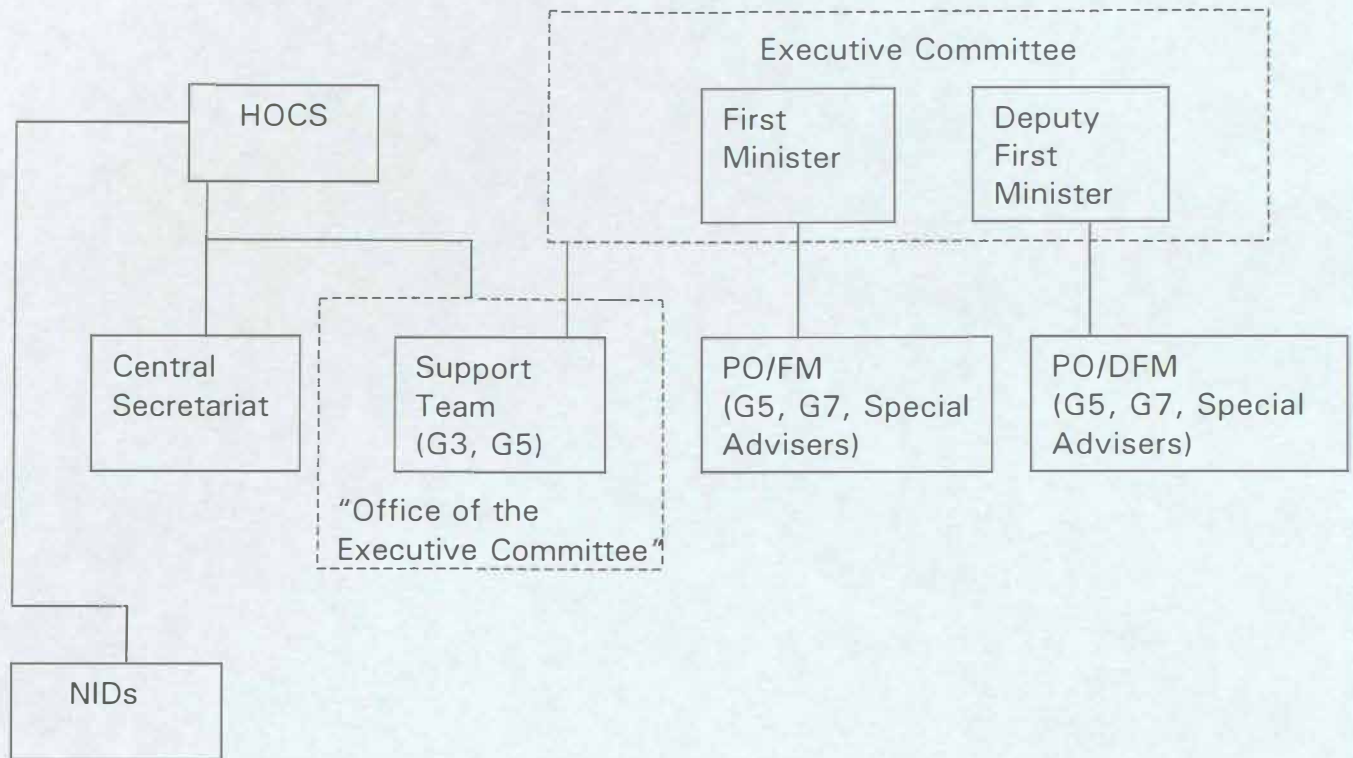
### Looking Ahead

13. While it is fair to say that the events of the summer have been a major distraction for both Ministers and that current difficulties continue to keep them from concentrating on the business of preparing for Government (for which purpose the Support Team is primarily there to help), there is nevertheless an underlying and in some ways fundamental difference between them in their approach to joint working, of which their attitude to the Support Team arrangements, and separately, to Frank Woods and his GIS colleagues on the media side is an illustrative symptom. I make no comment on the politics of this, other than to say that it is there, that it is unlikely to go away in the immediate future and that it is perhaps the single most important factor in deciding how we might adjust the arrangements in light of experience to date.
14. At the more practical level, it has become clear from recent discussions between the Support Team, Central Secretariat, special advisers and the Private Offices that there is considerable scope for streamlining information flows between the 2 Ministers and the wider system and for handling material in a less bureaucratic way. Doreen Brown will be revising the current guidance to Departments on dealings with the 2 Private Offices in light of our discussions. I would expect this to result in much less unnecessary handling of material by the Support Team and more direct channels of communication between the Private Offices and NIDs/Central Secretariat. The 2 experienced Private Secretaries already in place (and the 2 PPSs when they are appointed) should be well qualified to

deal with the flow of information without another link in the chain, although Paul Sweeney and I would of course expect to be copied in on exchanges routinely to keep track of what is going on.

15. Taking all of this together, it has been clear for some time that we need to review the original concept for the Support Team and to re-orientate it in a way which meets both Ministers' concerns and which both regard as acceptable. As we have discussed, and as I know you have discussed with others, I think this can be done by looking ahead to what we think central administrative arrangements might look like under devolution and considering what might be put in place now to work towards those arrangements.
16. In broad terms, it is certain that there will be some sort of "Office of the Executive Committee" providing co-ordinated administrative support to local Ministers acting collectively or as a "Cabinet". There is an issue to do with whether the Office's functions should be based in statute (for example, in the form of a Department of the Executive), but that is a separate matter and not directly relevant to the present debate about support structures.
17. It also seems certain that a number of current administrative arrangements and other functions discharged or carried out at the centre (for example, Central Secretariat, VIP Visits, Honours) would naturally be located within the Office. New functions, such as the secretariat for the Executive Committee and for the NSMC, a unit to co-ordinate the Executive's contribution to the BIC and, based on the revised Cabinet Office model in Whitehall, a policy co-ordination and innovation unit, would also be natural candidates for the centre. Depending on the outcome of the debate on Departmental structures, others (for example, EU matters and equality) might be added.
18. Needless to say, there is a considerable amount of work to get through to develop an appropriate model, drawing on experience elsewhere (the Cabinet Office, the Taoiseach's Department, the EC Cabinet system, and so on), and to ensure that the necessary structures are in place and up and running from devolution. I suggest that this is the area to which the Support Team might now turn its main attention.
19. In terms of timing, I think an appropriate formal point for the switch would be the formation of the shadow Executive Committee, although the process of re-adjusting our focus could start now and the Chinese wall between the Team and the rest of the system, which is already crumbling, could be dismantled.

20. In overall organisational terms the developing model for the rest of the shadow period would be as follows:



21. As you can see, there would be a clear reporting line between the emerging Office (and therefore the Support Team) and you at the administrative level, and a similar connection between the Office (and the Team) and the Executive Committee itself, including the First and Deputy First Ministers. The Team would be joined over time by additional staff to carry out specific functions in support of the Executive Committee and would also eventually merge with existing central machinery (for example, Central Secretariat) as we move closer to devolution.
22. We can re-write the Team's roles and responsibilities to reflect the proposed model. But one other small, but significant organisational arrangement will need to be clarified in the meantime. At the moment, I have overall line management responsibility for the Team, including the Private Offices, and I am the budgetholder for its expenditure. Continuing the arrangement would be logical under the proposed model, in which case I would retain line management responsibility for the Private Offices, including the PPSs, although obviously on a day to day basis they would continue to work to their political masters.



23. There are other options (for example, a direct line to you) and I am entirely neutral on the preferred arrangement. But if it is felt that it would be more appropriate for line responsibility to be moved elsewhere then I would want to relinquish control of the budget. I would be happy to discuss the pros and cons of all of this further with you, if you wish.

**Conclusion**

24. I am sorry for the length of this minute, but I thought it important to set the full context for moving forward with an issue which has caused a number of us some difficulty over the past few months. I think it is fair to say that what is proposed is in line with the thinking of other immediate and interested colleagues around the office so I hope there will be no significant dissent. But obviously if there are any comments on refining the model they would be very welcome.
25. Whether the proposed adjustment to the Support Team arrangements will suit the First and Deputy First Ministers is another matter which will require careful handling. But if, as I understand it, you will be seeing them to discuss the role of special advisers and PPSs before they go off to the US next week, I think it is critically important that you also factor in the changing role of the Support Team and try to secure a clear understanding of and agreement to what is proposed.
26. You may wish to have a further word beforehand, in which case perhaps Monday's prayers would be a suitable opportunity.

*DAVID FERGUSON*

**DAVID FERGUSON**

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