

SUMMARY OF PERMANENT SECRETARY'S BRIEFING SESSION WITH ASSEMBLY MEMBERS & SUPPORT STAFF

THURSDAY 30 MARCH 2000

1. Jon Shortridge opened this, the second briefing session he had held with Assembly Members, by explaining that he hoped that the session could be a discussion, rather than a monologue. It was important that Members and officials had the opportunity to discuss issues on a regular basis and in an open forum, the timing of which could be tailored to suit Members. The Assembly's civil servants needed to understand the politicians' perspective on the Assembly, and he would welcome hearing the concerns and views of AMs and their support staff.

Point 1 – Most AMs appreciate the massive change and learning curve that the Welsh Office civil servants have had to go through over the last 10 months. (The welcome that we Members received last May – and the careful preparations which went into that – was much appreciated.) Most officials have adapted very well but there are still a few who give the impression that they are reluctant to take forward Members' decisions.

Jon Shortridge: Without specific examples (which we can discuss privately), I can only talk in general terms. I am the first to admit that we haven't got our internal communications right yet. With nearly 3,000 civil servants working for the Assembly, it is not feasible to speak to them all directly and so we have had to rely on other means of communication such as e-mail and newsletters, some of which have proved less effective than others. So I am not totally surprised to hear that some officials remain uncertain of their new role. We, the Assembly's civil servants, are required to serve and advise the administration to the best of our ability. To do so successfully, it is essential that we have the trust of the administration. The model that I have used, therefore, has been to introduce the private briefing service, via the Library, for Assembly Members. But I remain very conscious of the dangers of creating an 'us and them' culture.

I hope that, over time, AMs will develop a more personal relationship with Heads of Division and other senior officials. But it is important that contact is maintained at this senior level, as more junior staff won't necessarily have the broader perspective or expertise to enable them to brief AMs direct.

Point 2 – I know that many AMs feel, as I do, that our security staff here in the Bay are paid a very low wage. The canteen staff are paid more. The security guards' salaries should reflect the high level of personal commitment amongst those staff.

Bryan Mitchell: I agree with your views. We are already reviewing the salary bands for the security staff because experience has shown that we are in danger of losing our more experienced officers to other employers. A high turnover is neither good practice nor cost effective, and it needs to be resolved as soon as possible. I will write to you in 4 weeks' time and let you know what progress has been made.

Action: Bryan Mitchell (Director of Personnel Management & Business Services)

Jon Shortridge: Once Bryan has written, and if the outcome is not to your satisfaction, we will be happy to discuss further. There is, I believe, a wider issue here: what channels do AMs have through which they can raise concerns like this? In general terms, such concerns can be raised with the House Committee, which can, in turn, bring them to the attention of the Presiding Officer or to me, depending on the issue. In addition, I hope that any Member would feel free to contact me direct if they have concerns about a staffing or administrative issue. I might then conclude that the issue is one for the Presiding Officer, rather than me, but I would ensure that the Member was kept in touch with what was happening.

Point 3 – We appreciate that the Assembly's civil servants are still undergoing a learning process but the relevant subject committee should be able to be provided with good quality policy advice. All Members deserve access to high quality and impartial information.

Jon Shortridge: I want to provide the best and fullest service possible for AMs, to the extent that this is politically acceptable. For instance, I would have no objections in principle to civil servants briefing party groups. But any such step could only be taken with the agreement of the Cabinet.

As far as the subject committees are concerned, the current model for briefing committees is founded on the principle that material commissioned by a Committee Chair is, strictly speaking, commissioned through the relevant Assembly Secretary. The Assembly Secretary – and not officials – puts papers to his or her subject committee. Officials are then present at the committee meeting and can be questioned as necessary. They are there to help by providing the factual information required. If the issue is political, rather than factual, then it is for the Assembly Secretary – who will also be present as a committee member –

to answer. But I have to warn Members that an undisciplined approach to seeking information from officials will simply place more pressure on already-busy staff which, in turn, will manifest itself in a poorer service overall.

Point 4 – We on the Agriculture Committee aren't getting enough detailed advice on procedures and processes in Europe to enable us to take informed decisions.

Jon Shortridge: Subject committees have a role in scrutinising the executive, developing policy and considering subordinate legislation. They don't have a decision-making function in an executive sense, and there is a distinction to be made between advice and information, but I agree that more could be done. For instance, we could put on briefing or Q&A sessions for committees – either in private or in public – on particular issues. This might be more sensible use of everyone's time, rather than clogging up busy agendas at the formal committee meetings.

As to legal advice, the Office of the Counsel General is staffed with very high calibre lawyers - who are paid by the Assembly. If the Assembly wishes to seek a second opinion on its lawyers' advice, then those costs have to be met on top. As Accounting Officer, I have to satisfy myself that this is justifiable expenditure from the public purse.

The Government took the view, when formulating the devolution settlement for Wales, that the Assembly would operate a Cabinet system. The Assembly can, of course, organise itself however it wishes, within the parameters of the Government of Wales Act 1998. But perhaps not all Members fully understand the flow of business within the Assembly. In January alone, for example, 650 separate submissions were submitted from officials to the Cabinet. If the committees were to be more involved in that decision-making process, it would demand a great deal of their time – and what would happen during recess periods? This is not to say that can't be done, but the enormous flow of everyday Assembly business would need to be fully understood and re-organised.

Point 5 – How is Whitehall reacting to devolution?

Jon Shortridge: My impression is that many civil servants in Whitehall are still in denial, and that many of those who are not are in a state of heightened suspicion. Whether we like it or not, we are still heavily dependent on Whitehall. We are still an integral part of the UK Government and we need to know what is happening on the primary legislation front and what is in the administrative pipeline. Returning for a moment to the previous point (about the provision of information to

because the Assembly as a whole exercises its functions through the delegation of its powers. In cases of planning law, for instance, it would be misleading to imply that a planning decision was not a decision of the Assembly. As you know, the First Secretary accepted a point made in a recent plenary session that, where appropriate, press statements would no longer be issued in the name of the Assembly but would attribute the decision to the Assembly Secretary responsible for the subject in question. I am sure that will help.

Action: Jon Shortridge

Point 8 – We need to be more welcoming and hospitable. For example, there is very little information on display each day about the business being conducted in different rooms here; there is insufficient catering (one vending machine) for the milling area; my committee had no hospitality budget to enable it to offer sandwiches to those attending a meeting which ran through lunchtime.

Jon Shortridge: These are issues for the House Committee and I will ask the Clerk to ensure that these issues are taken forward to that committee.

Action: John Lloyd, Clerk to the Assembly

Conclusion

2. It was agreed that it was essential that Members understood the position of the Assembly's civil servants and that the civil servants understood the new political context within which they now work. Staff in Cathays Park would very much welcome visits by Members, possibly in small groups or as a committee, to talk through issues of mutual interest, ways of working, etc. The Committee Secretariat would be asked to progress the idea of committee visits to Cathays Park.

Action: Marie Knox, Head of Committee Secretariat

3. It would help civil servants to understand Members' requirements if a few AMs would be willing to speak at relevant training courses. The Permanent Secretary also held monthly lunchtime discussion sessions with staff and would be delighted if any Member would be prepared to devote an hour to coming along to speak.

Action: Bryan Mitchell (Director of Personnel Management & Business Services)

4. The Permanent Secretary summarised his view that the devolution process could be split into 3 successive stages for the Assembly's civil servants: the first had been the constitutional change (drafting the Government of Wales Act, producing the Standing Orders, etc); the second had been the physical

change (equipping the Assembly building, designing new procedures and systems); and the third – which was the most difficult and was just beginning – was the cultural change (eg serving 60 members instead of 3 Ministers and doing so in a far more open and inclusive manner).

5. He was addressing this cultural change chiefly through his Delivering Better Government initiative. Better Government fused the ideas and thinking behind the UK Civil Service's Modernising Government agenda with the distinctive problems and opportunities facing the Assembly's civil servants. Better Government was being introduced in as consultative way as possible. An initial Action Plan had been produced and there had already been early changes, but he considered that it would take between 3 to 5 years to achieve his goal of an Assembly which set the standard for excellence in public administration and public service. This was a major process of change, aimed at making the Assembly's civil service more flexible and less hierarchical, and at finding the best and most effective ways in which to serve all Members.

6. Jon Shortridge said that he had found the session extremely valuable and that he would always make himself available to talk things through with Members as and when they wished.

7 April 2000

FIONA ADAMS JONES
PS/Permanent Secretary