

Copyright Notice

Crown copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of HMSO and the Queen's Printer for Scotland

All material contained in this document was scanned from a scanned photocopy of Minute from Mr. W.H. Cornish to Sir Charles Cunningham on The Home Office Wireless Organisation dated 22nd July 1959.

The licence granted by HMSO to re-publish this document does not extend to using the material for the principal purpose of advertising or promoting a particular product or service, or in a way, which could imply endorsement by a Department, or generally in a manner, which is likely to mislead others.

No rights are conferred under the terms of the HMSO Licence to anyone else wishing to publish this material, without first having sought a licence to use such material from HMSO in the first instance.

Signed

Steven R. Cole

Dated: 29th November 2005

Sir Charles Cunningham

The Home Office Wireless Organisation

1. The future of the Home Office Wireless Organisation has been under review for some years and I am now bringing the matter to your attention in order to obtain your decision. The matter is one in which a number of Home Office Divisions (Establishment, Finance, F.1, K.2 and Q) have an interest; but in practice, partly for historical reasons, the Police Department have had to take the lead.

2. The functions of the Organisation and the method of financing it are set out in full in the memorandum of 24th April, 1959. Briefly, the position is as follows. The Organisation started solely to provide and maintain police wireless, but has since been extended to cover the fire service and civil defence. The headquarters section does test and development work and the provincial depots install and maintain the equipment. The financial arrangements are complicated. The costs of the headquarters are met from the Exchequer. The costs of the provincial depots (less the charges made to the fire authorities which rank for general grant, and the charges made to the civil defence authorities which rank for civil defence grant) are shared equally between the police authorities and the Exchequer as a Common Police Service, the rates' share being recovered by a deduction from police grant proportionate to the authorised establishment. All the equipment, including the wireless sets, is purchased by the Exchequer and rented to the police and fire authorities at rentals adequate to cover the initial cost (and interest) in the average working life; the rental charges rank for police grant and general grant respectively. The civil defence authorities are not charged rentals. To put the complicated financial arrangements in another way:-

(a) A police authority:-

- (i) pays rental charges, ranking for police grant, for the sets and other equipment it decides to hire;
- (ii) whatever the number of sets it hires, suffers a deduction from police grant, proportionate to the authorised establishment; the total of the deductions being sufficient to meet half the cost of the Home Office depots, less the receipts from the charges levied on the fire and civil defence authorities. The forces (Metropolitan, City of London, Birmingham, and Lancashire) which provide and maintain their own wireless equipment pay no charges; the forces - still one or two Welsh counties - which have no wireless pay under (ii) but not (i).

(b) A fire authority:-

- (i) pays rental charges, taken into account in fixing the level of general grant, for the sets and other equipment it decides to hire;
- (ii) where it shares a main wireless station with the police authority, pays a contribution to that authority towards the cost of maintaining and operating that station;
- (iii) pays a contribution, based on the number of sets it has, towards the fire service share of the cost of the Home Office Depots.

The London County Council, Middlesex, Hertfordshire, Birmingham, West Ham and East Ham brigades are not in the Organisation and make none of the above contributions.

- (c) A civil defence authority pays a contribution based on the number of sets it has, towards its share of the cost of the Home Office Depots.

It only remains to add that it is by a tedious annual process of bargaining between the local authority associations and the Home Office, who have to obtain Treasury consent, that the apportionment of the cost of the Home Office depots between police, fire and civil defence is settled; the shares are roughly based on the proportions of equipment, serviced by the Depots, in use in the several services in the year in question.

3. The Home Office Depots were established as a Common Police Service in 1947. In 1953 Manchester expressed a wish to withdraw and set up their own wireless scheme. A Working Party, consisting of representatives of the Home Office, of the local authority associations and of the chief constables was appointed to consider the whole matter of police wireless before it was decided what to do about Manchester. The Working Party reported in 1955. A large majority thought that there should be no change in the existing arrangements, which ensured both reasonable economy and an acceptable standard of service; they recognised that commercial maintenance might be cheaper but thought that it might be of poor standard. Two representatives of the Association of Municipal Corporations, Mr Gregg and Mr Pollard, in reservations to the report, thought that selected police authorities should be allowed to set up their own schemes and that the whole position should be reviewed again in 1960. The Town Clerk of Manchester, in a dissenting report, expressed the view that all police authorities should be free to run their own schemes, and that this would be cheaper than, and as efficient as, purchase and maintenance by the Home Office. What weighed greatly with the majority of the Working Party was that while the Home Office Organisation might cost some of the large police authorities more than if they ran their own schemes, and might give them less satisfactory service, the Organisation met the needs of all the authorities at a reasonable cost; and that if some of the large authorities withdrew this would leave the smaller authorities with the choice of remaining within the Organisation, which would have become more expensive, or running their own scheme, which might also be expensive or indeed impracticable.

4. The County Councils Association accepted the view of the majority of the Working Party, but the Association of Municipal Corporations sent a deputation to see the Secretary of State in 1955 which argued that authorities should be free to withdraw. The Secretary of State asked them to reconsider their attitude in the interests of the service as a whole. Subsequently we had discussions with Sir Harold Banwell, who sounded us in 1956 on our attitude to a proposal that Manchester should run a separate scheme in conjunction with the neighbouring boroughs. We reserved our position and the matter came to nothing as most of the other boroughs would not even attend a meeting with Manchester to discuss the proposal. This was in 1956 and since then we have had no further formal approach. Sir Harold Banwell and Mr Gregg have from time to time asked whether any changes were in prospect, but we have said no more than that the matter was under review, and that we were open to any suggestion.

5. A rough summary of the views of those principally concerned is:-

Home Office

- (a) Establishment Division - find the Central Committee on Common Police Services' control of the staffing of the Home Office Depots irksome. This could be overcome only by withdrawing the Organisation from the purview of that Committee; that is, by making it a purely Home Office concern which would sell its services and facilities to whoever would pay for them.

- (b) Fire Service Department - find the grumbles of the fire authorities about the high level of the Home Office charges a nuisance, and will agree to any proposal that makes for decentralisation; have no real control since general grant was introduced.
- (c) Communications Branch - are in favour of maintaining the status quo.
- (d) Finance Division - have no pronounced views.
- (e) Police Department - want the system that will provide an efficient service for all forces at a reasonable cost provided that it is not too cumbersome to administer; and at present incline to the view that there is a balance of advantage in favour of continuing the present arrangements.

Outside the Home Office

- (a) The Treasury - have not been consulted and their views are not known. There is no reason to suppose that they would raise objection to the present arrangements continuing and although an arrangement under which all authorities provided and maintained their own equipment (either individually or in groups) would almost certainly mean greater expenditure, the Treasury would probably not object to it. They would, however, be likely to object to the existing Organisation being maintained to meet the needs of only some of the police authorities who so use it, and they would no doubt try to prevent this happening by saying that any authority that withdraws shall be required to continue to contribute to the costs of the Organisation.
 - (b) The County Councils Association - are probably content with the present arrangements, but their representatives on the Central Committee on Common Police Services are inclined to be critical of any proposal to appoint more staff at the Depots.
 - (c) The Association of Municipal Corporations - on principle would probably like the authorities to be free to withdraw, but probably appreciate that the withdrawal of some would mean that the smaller boroughs would then have to meet higher costs, and this may account for the absence of any serious pressure from the Association recently.
 - (d) The Chief Constables - are on the whole in favour of the present arrangements, under which they have no need to obtain approval from the police authority for capital expenditure on wireless equipment, or for expenditure on maintenance since it is deducted from grant; are generally rather critical of delays in supplying them with the most up-to-date equipment, but are ready to listen to explanation on this point; are critical of our failure to provide a preventive maintenance service, and so to save the waste of police time in taking sets back to the depots for repair. One or two Chief Constables who are particularly keen on wireless would probably like to break away and run their own schemes.
6. We have been considering for some time the issue of a circular on the lines of the draft within, which would tell the authorities that they were free to withdraw from the Organisation, but would ask them to take the national interest into account before doing so. It is difficult to estimate the effect of issuing such a circular. We think that it would probably lead to a number of the larger police authorities withdrawing from the Organisation and setting up their own wireless schemes. This in

turn would lead to some increase in costs for those authorities that remain, but whether the increase would be sufficient to lead to further withdrawals, and so to a further increase of costs for those that remain, we cannot tell. The main reasons for issuing a circular of this kind would be (a) irritation with the difficulties and tiresomeness of the present arrangements, (b) the argument of principle that the provision of wireless, and subsequent maintenance, is not the sort of thing that it is really appropriate for a Government Department to do. In particular, this is not the sort of function that the Home Office is well equipped to carry out. The existing arrangements are cumbersome, and from time to time they are bound to cause difficulties with the local authorities. We are also in continuous difficulties with the Treasury in obtaining approval of the necessary expenditure on wireless equipment; and with the Central Committee on Common Police Services in obtaining the necessary authority for additional staff for the Depots. All these considerations, and in particular the extremely complex financial arrangements, and the fact that we are open to criticism from police forces and fire brigades whenever there are short-comings in the standard of service provided, mean that one is naturally disposed to try and get rid of this responsibility if it is at all feasible to do so. It must also be borne in mind that the existing arrangements were brought into effect when police wireless was in its infancy and when there was really no practicable alternative. There can be little doubt that there now is a practicable alternative, and that many, if not most, local authorities would be capable, either under their own arrangements or by agreement with commercial firms, of running reasonably efficient wireless schemes. Whether this is true of the more sparsely populated parts of the country, for example, Wales, is, however, open to doubt.

7. Despite these fairly substantial arguments for issuing the circular, there is good reason for arguing that the public interest requires us to take no action. On the whole, the present arrangements are probably the best way of providing the service for police authorities generally and especially the smaller authorities; and the practical difficulties which would arise from the withdrawal of a number of authorities would be serious. Every year the Treasury raise difficulties about our proposed expenditure on wireless equipment. If we do issue the circular giving freedom to withdraw, there is little doubt that the Treasury would clamp down on the purchase of any more equipment and on the employment of more staff at the Depots; and would say that it was only sensible to ensure that no equipment was left on our hands by withdrawals. This would mean that the Organisation would be starved of new equipment and that the standard of service would drop. I can imagine nothing more likely to cause difficult relations with Chief Constables and to lead to the break-up of the Organisation in disorder. This would leave a legacy of bad feeling behind it, and we must at all costs avoid this. This seems to me to be the risk we run if we issue a circular on the lines of the draft within.

8. It is relevant at this point to give a brief account of the current state of the Organisation. It has suffered in the past, particularly in the period 1952-1954, from economy cuts and there was a further hold up in the replacement of equipment from 1954-1955 while the Working Party were sitting. The effect of this is that there is a great deal of old equipment still in use which ought to have been replaced years ago. We are replacing this equipment steadily on the basis of a seven-year programme, and 1959-60 is the third year of the first seven-year cycle. From now on re-equipment will go on as a continuous process, but until we have completed the first cycle we are particularly vulnerable to suggestions that we have not in fact provided equipment of good standard. This in itself would mean that if at the present time we were to concede freedom to withdraw that freedom might well be exercised by a substantial number of authorities.

9. In fairness to the Treasury, I should point out that it is not only with them that we have difficulties. The Central Committee on Common Police Services have, in

effect, control of the number of staff employed at the Depots, and in recent years they have consistently refused to authorise a sufficient number of staff for the organisation of preventive maintenance. At present, if a set breaks down the Chief Constable has to send it back to the Depot for repair. This leads to a great waste of police time in carrying sets to and from the Depots. A system of preventive maintenance, which we are assured is sound on technical grounds, would provide for Home Office technicians to go round to the forces and carry out systematic maintenance. This would mean that a very large proportion of faults would be discovered before there is trouble, and cars and motorcycles would not be put off the road because of breakdowns. We hope this year to persuade the Central Committee on Common Police Services and the Treasury that the extra staff needed for preventive maintenance would be fully justified. If they show their old reluctance on this point, I would consider inviting them to authorise the staff necessary for the introduction of the preventive maintenance system at, perhaps, one or two of the nine Depots, for an experimental period. This could be done by a very small addition to the numbers of staff, and at the end of the experimental period we could ask the authorities concerned whether they preferred the old system, or the new. We would hope that the answers, if favourable, would convince both the Central Committee and the Treasury.

10. I should not like to give the impression that the Organisation has been standing still in recent years because of these difficulties. In fact, the number of sets serviced by the Organisation has increased from under 3,000 in 1953-54 to nearly 7,000 this year. This shows the rate of increase in the use of wireless. But these considerations do lead to the conclusion that the present is not a particularly suitable time to initiate changes in the Organisation.

11. There is one further point I should mention and that is the likely reactions of the Home Office staff in the Depots. There have been various staff cuts and so forth in the past, and these have at times had an unsettling effect. The staff are particularly liable to be sensitive about suggestions that the Home Office Organisation might one day be broken up, leaving them without a job. Moreover, rumours of this sort may lead to difficulties in recruitment. There is, therefore, everything to be said for not opening this issue unless we are going to carry it through to a conclusion; and for keeping any proposals confidential as long as possible.

12. My conclusion is that there are three possible courses:-

- (i) we could consult the Treasury, and subsequently the local authority associations, about the issue of a circular on the lines of the draft within.
- (ii) We could take no initiative ourselves, and could try to prevent any changes being made until all the old equipment has been replaced in about four years' time. During this period we could make every effort to raise the standard of service by seeing that the new types of equipment are introduced promptly, and by thoroughly investigating the feasibility of introducing preventive maintenance. On the whole, I am of the opinion that this course is the proper one to take, and it would not prevent us from undertaking to review the whole issue if either of the local authority associations should press it.
- (iii) We could tell the Association of Municipal Corporations that we are agreeable to a few police authorities withdrawing from the Organisation and providing their own wireless schemes on an experimental basis; and that in order to consider the matter further we should be glad to know the names of the authorities concerned. We would go on to say that we do not propose to make any major changes in the existing arrangements and that we do not think that any general pronouncement, or the issue of a circular, is necessary.

In short, on selfish Departmental and personal grounds, I should be glad to be rid of this troublesome subject; but I believe that in the general public interest we ought to try to carry on.

13. You may wish to discuss this complicated question. I am sorry that this minute is so very long, but it could well be longer! I have not considered the draft letters in the file, as it does not seem worth it at this stage.

(Intld.) W.H.C.

22nd July, 1959

Mr Cornish

We had a brief talk yesterday about the difficult question dealt with in your minute of the 22nd July. Like you, I would welcome a change of policy which enabled the Home Office to be rid of this troublesome subject. I am sure, however, that in present circumstances you are right in concluding that the course we ought to follow is that outlined in para. 12(ii) of your minute. We are not, as I understand it, under strong pressure to make a change; and a time when re-equipment is incomplete is not one at which to abandon the present system. In any event, there seem to me to be strong arguments to support the view that a service of this kind ought to be nationally operated. Apart from any other considerations, any denationalisation would either leave the Home Office to look after the weaker brethren at greater expense, or produce widely varying standards of efficiency, which could not be in the interests of the three Services who are at present dependent on the scheme.

My conclusion, therefore, like yours, is that we should carry on with the present arrangements for the time being and continue to do our best to see that the scheme is operated efficiently and economically.

(Intld.) C.C.C.

18th August, 1959