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Mr Shane McAteer
Clerk
Committee for Finance and Personnel
Room 419
Parliament Buildings
Stormont

9 March 2012

Dear Shane,

I understand that the Committee has agreed that flexible working should be the subject of a Committee Inquiry and has invited Departmental officials to give evidence on flexible working at its session on 14 March. In particular, the Committee is interested in the extent to which the recommendations in the Independent Review of Policy on Location of Public Sector Jobs (the Bain Review) in respect of flexible working and the NICS Homeworking Policy have been implemented. The Committee intends to agree Terms of Reference for its Inquiry following this session.

It is important to note that the Bain Review has not been formally considered by the Executive, nor has it been adopted as policy either for the public sector generally or the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) specifically. The Minister for Finance and Personnel's publicly stated position regarding the Bain Review is that the Review was undertaken at a time of very different financial circumstances. He has stated that the budgetary situation has changed significantly since then and, in the current financial climate and in light of the spending pressures facing all departments' administration budgets, he has taken the view that spending £40m on a pilot programme for relocating public sector jobs (as recommended in the Bain Review) is not affordable. There is no Executive programme regarding the relocation of public sector

jobs and no central budget earmarked for such purposes, although the Minister has stated that it is open to each Minister, department or public body to make a case regarding the location or relocation of facilities or jobs subject to the normal considerations of business need, value for money and affordability.

DFP does not have a mandate, nor is it resourced, for overseeing issues affecting the location of public sector jobs or flexible working in the wider public sector, which obviously employs many more people than the NICS (the NICS accounts for approximately 12% of all public sector employment in Northern Ireland).

There is no specific programme or strategy in the NICS focusing exclusively on flexible working or on implementing the recommendations on flexible working contained at paragraph 6.8.2 of the Bain Report (a number of those recommendations are predicated on the existence of a public sector relocation strategy, and such a strategy has not been adopted by the Executive). Nevertheless, there have been a number of developments in the areas of use of technology and premises, and others are planned, which are relevant to the recommendations and which support, either directly or indirectly, flexible working as envisaged by the Bain Review.

Turning firstly to the application of new technology, relevant initiatives include the successful roll out across all NICS sites of Network NI (as anticipated in the Bain Review). Coupled with the creation of IT Assist (the NICS shared service for the provision of IT services), this means that staff can connect their laptop to the NICS network and work remotely online at virtually any NICS site. Specifically within DFP, for example, which has premises on a number of sites in Belfast, Bangor and the Stormont Estate, this means that DFP officials have the facility temporarily to “touch down” at any DFP premises outside of their normal office location as necessary.

The introduction of a common secure access service also allows staff with the right equipment to gain access to departmental IT services from non-NICS locations such as home. This service includes:

- access via 3G mobile;
- access via departmental provided Broadband (provided for key users or when guaranteed service level is required); and
- access via a member of staff's own home broadband connection.

The NICS has embarked on an initiative to update the ageing NICS telephone network. The new system is called IP Telephony (IPT) and introduces a range of new services and facilities such as extension mobility which allows staff to log into their telephone extension from any location that has IPT and a facility which links an extension with a mobile phone so that staff can receive calls while on the move. IPT runs on Network NI and is a key component of the NICS **Unified Communications Initiative**, which itself will be a key enabler for flexible working. IPT also facilitates the introduction of video phones. This is a major infrastructure project and to date it has been deployed to over 11,000 staff making the NICS IPT deployment the largest anywhere on the island of Ireland. The project will take 12-18 months to complete.

The NICS BlackBerry service is another key component to enable flexible working. The BlackBerry permits easy access to corporate e-mail and documents while off site. More importantly, when combined with IPT the device can act as an extension of the corporate telephony system.

Instant Messaging and Presence is another key component of the NICS Unified Communications Initiative. This technology is integrated into the IPT environment and runs on desktop and laptop computers to provide a number of features:

- **Instant Messaging**

Instant messaging is nothing new, but this is a corporate NICS version and provides a simple alternative to e-mail for short messages. This would be particularly useful for individuals working from home or teams working across different locations.

- **Group Chat**

Group chat is similar to Instant Messaging but involves a whole team simultaneously.

- **Voice**

The voice element is the same as IPT so staff use the same extension number, but via a headset attached to their PC. This is of particular importance for flexible working as it extends the corporate telephony environment to wherever the member of staff is working from.

- **Presence**

Presence is another key enabler for flexible working. The system will automatically detect when a member of staff logs into the system and will show them as “available”. The status will change when on the phone, away from the computer or at a meeting. Staff can override the status settings. This system supports flexible working as it provides disparate teams with information on availability, for example to take a call or answer a query.

- **Video**

The software will allow the transmission of video via a suitable PC based webcam. The video will integrate with the NICS video phone and video conferencing technology.

This technical solution is currently in final testing and is due to enter service in the next month or so.

Telepresence is in effect high quality video conferencing. The NICS has been using video conferencing for many years. However, there has not been a cohesive NICS strategy or approach to this issue. As part of the NICS Unified Communications Initiative there is investment in infrastructure to bring together existing and future video conferencing units into an integrated telepresence network which will also link to desktop and phone based video users. This solution is due to go into testing in the next few months and will hopefully enter full service by Autumn 2012.

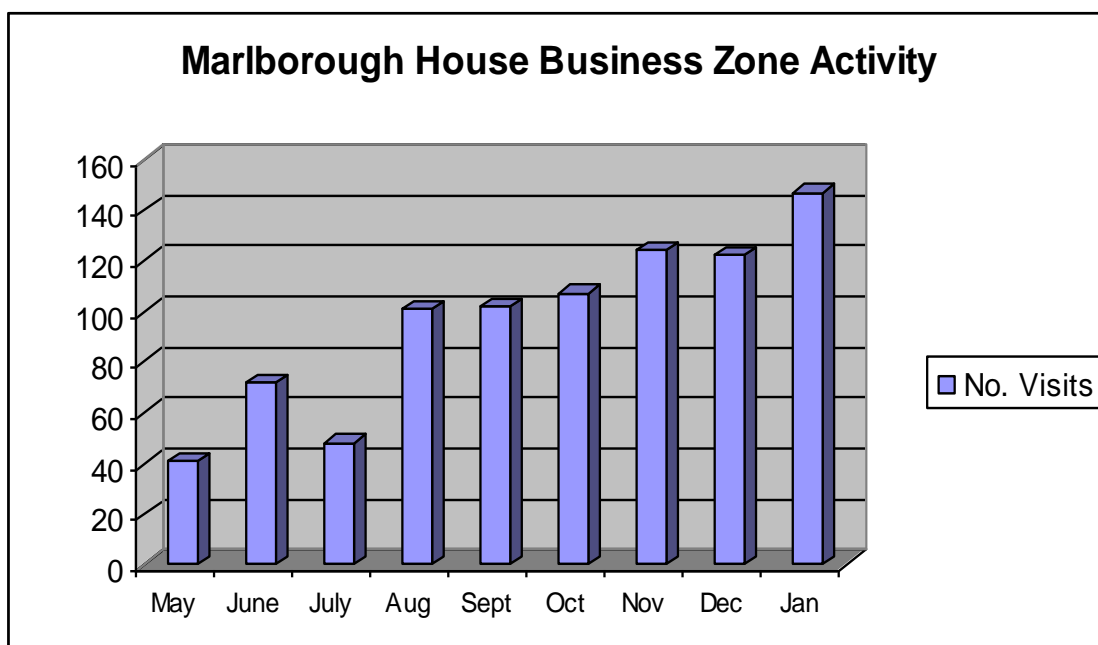
Outlook Web Access allows staff to have browser access to their e-mail from any PC on the NICS network. In addition, Roaming Profiles allow staff to log into any PC and gain access to their desktop. This will offer flexibility in terms of the location of work.

Other initiatives which are under way and which have a relevance to flexible working include a pilot of Web Conferencing, with a particular focus on how to manage the security risks, a review of a tablet device which can be linked to the NICS BlackBerry environment and an investigation of secure wireless. Work is also under way with a technology called Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) which could eventually allow staff to use any PC – even their own – to gain access to Government systems.

The above technologies support many different business scenarios. However, together they form a “toolkit” which could support any flexible working strategy.

In terms of managing the civil service estate to support flexible working, a pilot regional satellite office was installed in Marlborough House in Craigavon in May 2011. The office provides 20 workstations, 6 of which have networked computers attached. The remainder offer network points where staff can connect their laptop to the NICS network. The satellite office also offers printing facilities and a small break-out area and a tea-point. Entrance to the business zone is controlled by the front-desk staff in the building, with access available only to staff registered in the business zone scheme. To date the scheme has been targeted at workers whose role requires them to be away from their normal place of work on a regular basis. Such staff are typically schools inspectors, agricultural inspectors or environmental inspectors whose headquarters buildings are located in Greater Belfast or Bangor.

The chart below shows the usage levels of the business zone at Marlborough House since its opening in May 2011.



The business zone scheme also allows those registered to access other flexible working zones in Clare House (Harbour Estate, Belfast), Causeway Exchange (Belfast City Centre) and Castle Buildings (Stormont Estate). Currently around 230 staff are registered in the scheme, with the majority from DFP, DE, DARD, DOE and DEL.

It is important to note that the business zone scheme has not been offered as an option for office-based staff wishing to reduce their commuting time, except in exceptional circumstances such as extremely poor weather conditions or during industrial action. It is not anticipated that this policy will change without detailed consideration of the management and business issues that would arise should the concept be broadened.

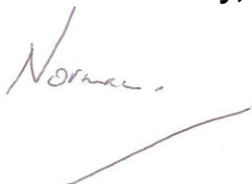
A small zone similar to that in Marlborough House has been set up in the main reception area of Castle Buildings in the Stormont Estate to support officials whose headquarters location is outside the estate but who may have to visit Stormont, for example to support Ministers or appear at Assembly Committees.

Although homeworking can be facilitated on an informal and occasional basis, the NICS has not proceeded to implement the formal draft Working at Home

policy in light of concerns expressed about the potential impacts of the proposal at senior level in DFP. The main concern is that the rationale for the policy as drafted focuses in the main on work/life balance issues but ignores the need for homeworking to deliver efficiencies that might be generated in the context of more flexible working practices. The policy as drafted envisages staff being permitted to work from home whilst maintaining permanent work stations at their normal place of work, whereas the cost efficiencies of homeworking will primarily be realised through the release of permanent work stations in a structured way, thus freeing office space. Other concerns include the business inflexibilities that could arise from large numbers of staff benefitting from individual line manager decisions to permit home working, without having regard to the more strategic needs of the department or business; the difficulties that are now starting to emerge in some departments' business areas because of the extent of alternative working patterns that have been permitted for individual members of staff and the consequent inability of departments to redeploy staff in light of business need; and, quite simply, the length and inherent bureaucracy of the draft policy. Whilst homeworking is currently permissible on an informal and locally agreed basis from time to time, it is considered that the draft Working at Home policy needs to be reconsidered and recast to avoid unintended consequences and to focus more securely on efficiency gains, and officials have been asked to do this.

In conclusion, the NICS does not have a formal flexible working strategy, although some of the elements that might underpin such a strategy in terms of the application of new technology and use of premises are in place and are being developed further. The Bain Review looked more generally at the public sector, and at present DFP has not taken on a role in co-ordinating policy in respect of technology, premises or human resources to promote flexible working across the wider public sector.

Yours sincerely,



NORMAN IRWIN