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**From the Office of the
Minister of Finance & Personnel**

**DFP Private Office
2nd Floor
Clare House
303 Airport Road West
Belfast BT3 9ED**

Daithi McKay MLA
Chairman
Committee for Finance & Personnel
Room 419
Parliament Buildings
Stormont

Telephone: 028 90816711

Email: private.office@dfpni.gov.uk

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Dear

DAITHI

**REPORT ON THE INQUIRY INTO FLEXIBLE WORKING IN THE PUBLIC
SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Thank you for conducting the Inquiry into Flexible Working in the Public Sector and for producing the associated report. It is a very comprehensive document that contains many useful observations and proposals.

I welcome and agree with the Committee's assertion that a 'one size fits all' policy approach to flexible working is not appropriate. It is widely acknowledged that some areas of work and particular front-line jobs are not suitable for flexible working arrangements. It is also generally accepted that flexible working solutions should only be implemented if there is no adverse impact on the service provided to the public or on the overall efficiency of the department concerned.

Likewise, I welcome the Committee's view that the focus of flexible working should not be on homeworking in particular, but rather on selecting the appropriate remote working options and technologies. We note that where homeworking is utilised, it should be on the basis of careful assessment of job tasks and agreed rules and safeguards, including contact protocols and good performance management. We are therefore content that departments continue to utilise homeworking arrangements as their business needs require. My Department also believes that the performance management system helps support the principle of flexible working, as staff productivity and performance is measured by a range of outputs and objectives, which should not be influenced by the location of the person.

I note and agree with the potential benefits of flexible working that have been outlined in the report. We have recognized for some time the benefits that flexible working can bring. These include:

- improved staff morale and commitment;
- reduced staff turnover and absenteeism;
- improved work-life balance;
- wider recruitment talent pools; and
- promotion of gender equality in employment.

Throughout the NICS we have been proactive in implementing a range of alternative working patterns to assist staff in achieving a good work-life balance. I was therefore pleased to note that the Committee deemed the NICS an exemplar organisation in this respect. The implementation of these flexible working patterns seems to be having a positive effect, as the results of last year's staff survey showed that over 60% of NICS staff agreed that they achieve a good balance between their work life and private life.

My Department has also been extremely proactive in exploiting new technology to support flexible working practices. Contrary to the assessment in the flexible working report, the NICS has been very much a leader in this respect. Not only has it identified the opportunities presented by new technology, it has implemented several as Proof of Concepts or live running.

There are numerous examples of how my Department has used emerging technologies to promote flexible and agile working across the NICS. These include Secure Remote Access; NetworkNI (which is now available at all NICS sites); access to the BlackBerry Service; and Unified Communications (which is a key enabler for flexible and agile working). We will continue to keep pace with technological developments and will implement new ideas, where possible, to improve flexible working practices.

The report expresses the view that internet-based conferencing should be the preferred method for civil servants participating in meetings which involve travel outside Northern Ireland. The Committee may wish to note that internet-based web conferencing is already supported, and has been available for some time in the NICS, using the Webex product.

We are continuing to improve this service and plans are well advanced to introduce an internal web conferencing facility, which will also have the capability to include people from outside the NICS. We believe that this approach will help address any security concerns in relation to the current product and will result in a more extensive use of the facility.

In addition to this, my Department introduced a centralised video conferencing service at the beginning of 2012. This service continues to grow and although some stand alone facilities still exist within departments, a large number of units have been migrated into the central structure. In the last year alone, almost 4,000 meetings were hosted by this service.

I note that the flexible working report calls for the roll out of appropriately designed workplaces and the rationalisation of government office accommodation to achieve savings and support flexible working practices. The report also recommends the extension of the Business Zone/workhub network across the public sector.

While I support this principle, it is worth stressing that savings will only be achieved if there is a net reduction in office accommodation space. We should not have a situation whereby one person holds a desk in their normal office base, as well as in a remote location.

As part of the Asset Management Strategy, DFP is continuing to work with departments to upgrade and improve office accommodation to Workplace NI standards and will facilitate the set-up of additional business zones, as part of this work programme. In addition, the Reform of Property Management project will bring those properties transferring into an expanded DFP Properties Division's office estate to the same Workplace NI standards. I am content that this strategy, which is already in place, will help rationalise accommodation and facilitate flexible working practices across the office estate.

The Committee report recommends that a new Programme for Government (PfG) commitment be developed in relation to flexible working. I feel that this recommendation needs careful consideration. While I recognise that flexible working is an important issue, which should be considered and addressed, I am not convinced that a PfG commitment is an appropriate mechanism for doing this. PfG targets should be about the level of service delivered to the people of Northern Ireland, not on the internal processes used to deliver these services.

A further recommendation is for DFP to develop corporate guidance in order to address the Committee's concern that departments currently display a piecemeal and inconsistent approach to flexible working. The report also recommends that DFP play a lead role in monitoring and reporting on the implementation of flexible working practices.

However, it has already been noted that a 'one size fits all' policy approach is not appropriate and that the focus must be on selecting the appropriate working options and technologies, which meet business needs. Individual Departments and local managers are in the best position to examine the feasibility of enhanced flexible working in relation to their business processes. They are also best-placed to assess the costs and benefits of additional flexible working practices and to develop the associated business case.

If we impose an additional monitoring and reporting role for DFP, there is a danger that we actually impede the flexible working process by adding an extra level of unnecessary bureaucracy. In my view, the role of DFP should be that of a facilitator, providing a support function to departments and work areas that are taking forward flexible working practices.

In many respects we are already providing this support across the NICS. We have rolled out technology that makes it possible for staff to work remotely or from

alternative NICS locations. We have developed business zones for use by NICS staff and will continue to work with departments to add to this network. We have developed a performance management system that is based on outputs and objectives, rather than the location of the person and we will continue to promote staff awareness of NICS flexible working practices through ongoing communications.

I appreciate the Committee's efforts in producing this comprehensive and thought-provoking report. I am fully committed to renewing, restructuring and reforming our public sector and believe it is imperative that we explore new ideas and technologies that could help us deliver high quality services in the most efficient way. While the NICS already has an excellent range of flexible working policies and technologies available for departments to utilise as their business needs require, my Department will continue to keep pace with developments in relation to flexible working and will introduce new policies and technologies, as the need arises.

Yours sincerely

SIMON HAMILTON MLA